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SERGEANT

MY LADY'S DIAMONDS

By ADELINE SERGEANT

F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY

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MY LADY'S DIAMONDS

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"A Rise in the World"

"Marjory Moore"

"Daunay's Tower"

My Lady's Diamonds

BY

ADELINE SERGEANT

Author of "A Rise in the World," "Daunay's Tower," "Marjory Moore."

F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY, 9 AND 11 EAST SIXTEENTH STREET, NEW YORK

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My Lady's Diamonds

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MY LADY'S DIAMONDS.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE CASTLE WELL.

He was in a thoroughly bad temper. He had made his plans for the evening, and they had all miscarried. It was not his fault. On a fine, warm evening like this one he had thought that a late walk along the cliffs would be exactly the thing that Joan would have appreciated. But it seemed that he had miscalculated her desires. She had told him rather curtly that she did not want to go out ; she was tired, and there was a man coming to dinner whom she wished to see. Therefore, Mr. Geoffrey Brandon could not expect her to go out with him after dinner, and naturally he felt that he had a right to be vexed.

He was not openly engaged to Joan, but every

one knew that he was deeply in love with her, and she had encouraged him so far that a rejection from her would have astonished everybody very much indeed. Brandon was not exactly rich, but he had a fair income of his own, and the prospect of success in his profession as a barrister. He was also by way of being something of a literary man, and his productions—chiefly in pages of high-class magazines and reviews—had gained him some credit in the world.

In the course of a year also he felt that he would be able to marry, if things kept at their present level. For he was no man to let a girl feel that she would have to endure poverty if she married him. Perhaps this was the reason why he had not yet made a formal proposal, and it was possible also that Joan thought him a little over-cautious. But she had not shown him any coldness, and that was the reason why he felt rather surprised when she had refused to go for a walk with him simply because old Professor Fairweather, who had known her father in days gone by, was coming to dine at the Tower, where she was a guest.

Brandon was also staying at the Tower, because

Lady Rockingham was his aunt, and she had an especial affection for her sister's son, not only because this tie of relationship existed, but because he had, in many respects, filled the part of a son to herself, and was always ready to give her the benefit of his help or counsel when she required it. One of the dreams of her heart had always been that he should marry Joan Carrington, who was the daughter of an old friend of hers, and a girl whose welfare she had very much at heart.

For Joan was poor as well as handsome, and Lady Rockingham was sometimes anxious about her future. Joan was—"unfortunately," as Lady Rockingham would have said—not an orphan. Her mother was dead, but her very undesirable father still lived, and there was never any knowing what claims he would raise, or what influence he would exert upon his daughter, if she had no protector to keep him at bay. Therefore, Lady Rockingham had invited her to the Tower, her husband's picturesque old place just outside St. Romuald's, a town on the northern coast once famous for its abbey and other great medieval institutions, but now falling somewhat into decay, and basing its reputation as a seaside resort chiefly

upon its salubrious air and a certain wild and savage beauty of the coast.

The Tower was finely situated on an eminence, from which a wide view of sea and land could be obtained ; and to walk out from the grounds along the cliffs, with the short, crisp grass under their feet, and the salt air blowing in their faces, had long been the recognized form of recreation with Lady Rockingham's visitors. Brandon, therefore, had not calculated upon a refusal when he asked Miss Carrington to come out with him in the long, dim twilight of that warm evening in September.

He felt, indeed, as if he had received a snub. Joan did not often refuse him anything, and he had an impression that there was something cold and unfriendly in her voice when she refused his invitation, and he wondered whether he had offended her.

Surely she could not find an old professor from Edinburgh more interesting than himself ? Or if she did, was it not a sign that she cared very little for him ? He afflicted himself with these thoughts at intervals all through dinner-time, when he noticed that she was giving all her attention to the

professor's remarks, and never once looking in his direction. The only thing that he could do was to devote himself to the lady whom he had taken in to dinner, and try to show Miss Carrington that he was as indifferent to her as she to him.

After all, it was not very difficult to devote himself to Mrs. Townley, who was a very pretty and amusing little woman. "Little woman!" He reflected on the term that had risen involuntarily to his lips. Mrs. Townley was not particularly little. She must be about Joan's height, after all; but, while Joan always gave the impression of being tall and stately, Nina Townley—owing, perhaps, to her extreme slightness and fragility—gave the impression of a much smaller woman.

She looked, in common parlance, as if a breath would blow her away. Her exquisite pink-and-white complexion, her fair, fluffy hair, her almost feverishly brilliant eyes, were not very much admired by Geoffrey Brandon; he preferred the pure, colorless oval of Joan's face, with the calm, gray eyes, and dark lashes, and the wealth of chestnut hair, almost too heavy for the small, graceful head. There was a sense of repose with

Joan which was conspicuously absent from the personality of Mrs. Townley.

He did not go into the drawing-room after dinner. He had no particular desire to resume his airy chit-chat with his fair neighbor, and he had a fancy that Joan wished to avoid him. He strolled out into the hall, and resolved to go for a short walk. Lady Rockingham and her guests would probably have their coffee on the terrace, but he thought he would not join them. He was more in the mood for loneliness, since Joan had refused to be his companion.

He threw on a light overcoat, noticing as he did so that the cloak which Joan usually wore in an evening stroll was lying upon a great oak chest in the outer hall; it looked as though she had placed it there in readiness for the evening. It was rather a pretty cloak, of dark-blue cloth, reaching to the feet, and provided with a hood, which could be drawn over the head. It was trimmed with long, dark fur, and looked very quiet and unobtrusive at a distance, but on a nearer view it could be seen that the somber hues were relieved by a lining of rose-colored satin, and that it was fastened with old silver clasps.

It was, in fact, rather a sumptuous garment, and Geoffrey knew it well, because it was one which he had helped Lady Rockingham to choose as a present for Joan a few months earlier in the year. He glanced at it rather grudgingly as he went out. It was too bad of Joan to let it lie there so temptingly, as if she were going to join him in the grounds, or on the cliffs, as she had so often done before. He strolled through the shrubbery and let himself out of the grounds by a small gate, from which he stepped at once into a wide moorland space, which stretched from the edge of the cliffs some distance inland.

The sky was absolutely clear, with a sort of primrose radiance lingering in the west, and the sea was so smooth that one could scarcely hear the lap of its waves along the shore. Brandon walked some distance, baring his head to the faint breeze, and feeling his nerves calmed and soothed by the quietness and beauty of the scene. It was almost dark when at last he began to retrace his steps, and the moon, which was in its last quarter, hung low in the violet sky.

"Old St. Romuald would look rather weird by this faint light," said Geoffrey to himself. "I

will stroll down and take a look at the ruins before I go in again. It can't be more than ten o'clock."

He made a circuit, avoiding the entrance to the Tower, and arriving in a few minutes at the town itself, which was as silent as a city of the dead. The people of St. Romuald went early to bed, and were not given to moonlight strolls. The place of which Brandon had thought was the ruin of an old castle, which stood on a jutting promontory, washed night and day by the waters of the German Ocean. The keep still raised its frowning battlements to the skies; wind and wave and fortunes of war had not availed to lower its haughty crest, but the greater part of the old castle consisted of crumbling walls and roofless apartments, which had long since ceased to shelter any living creature, except the furred and feathered denizens of such deserted abodes of men.

Geoffrey leaned his arms upon the stone coping of the low wall which ran round the enclosure, and gazed at the placid sea, which broke in little wavelets at the base of the cliff on which the castle was situated. For some time he remained there perfectly motionless, and was only aroused

from his reverie by the sound of footsteps which seemed to be crossing the pavement underneath the archway by which he had entered. Rather vexed at being disturbed, he glanced round, and immediately observed that he was perfectly well screened from observation, as a great block of masonry just behind effectually hid his figure, although he, from his corner, could see quite well the figures and movements of the two persons who had just entered the ruin.

Brandon sat perfectly still, concluding that the visitors were merely tourists, who wished to observe the effect of moonlight upon the fine old walls; and, like most tourists, they would soon, he thought, have completed their survey, and would leave him in undisturbed enjoyment of his solitude. But, to his great surprise, they did not seem at all hurried, neither did they bestow any attention, as far as he could judge, upon the architectural beauties of the place. They crossed the grassy space quite silently. It had once been the courtyard round which the quadrangle building had stood, and, rather to his surprise, they advanced almost to the spot where he was standing.

He was inclined to start up and make his presence known; but they paused at three or four yards' distance from him, choosing, as he noticed, a sheltered corner, where they were not likely to be visible to any passer-by. The old walls and archways afforded many shadowy corners where a person could linger without much fear of being observed, and it seemed to Brandon that these two persons deemed themselves perfectly safe from prying eyes or listening ears.

Struck by this thought, he half rose, in order to escape before any word of their conversation should fall upon his ears. But a moment later he sank back upon the stone seat which he occupied, and remained for some time utterly aghast and dumfounded. For the figure of the woman in the ruins was none other than that of Joan Carrington.

He told himself again and again that he must be mistaken, and that it was impossible that Joan Carrington, whom he had left at home chatting gaily with the professor, should have stolen out at night to meet a man in the ruins of St. Romuald's Castle. It was a thing which he could not have imagined Joan capable of doing. She had

always seemed to him the essence of truthfulness and candor.

Yet there she stood, wrapped in the dark-blue cloak with the rose-colored lining, that he knew so well, the dark fur caressing the outlines of her face and neck, and the hood drawn discreetly over her brows, as though she did not wish to be recognized. Indeed, so closely was her face concealed from view that Brandon himself would not have recognized her save for the graceful lines of her figure and the long blue cloak, under which he caught the sheen of her satin gown.

A certain sort of rage sprang up in Brandon's heart as he looked at the cloaked and hooded figure. It was possible, then, that a woman with Joan's clear eyes could deceive and betray him ? For surely she had deceived him when she refused to walk out on the pretext of her interest in old Professor Fairweather's conversation ? And who was the man ? Brandon's eyes turned fiercely and jealously upon her companion.

Then for one moment he drew a breath of relief. Surely Joan could never care for a man of that kind ? It was impossible ! He was a man whose character was all too plainly written on his

face for all the world to see. No, Joan could not love a man of that kind. But what extraordinary complication of circumstances, what entanglement of affairs could cause her to arrange a private meeting with an unknown individual, of shady antecedents and uncertain character, in a lonely ruin, almost at dead of night?

Brandon obstinately refused to move from his place when his conscience told him that he ought to make his presence known. He would do nothing of the kind. He would stay and look and listen; he would defend Joan, if need be, and reproach her afterwards for her treachery. At present it was quite clear to him that his duty was to remain, if only as a spectator, at this mysterious interview. As a spectator only. For, as he very speedily discovered, he could not hear a word they said.

They had approached the ledge of an old well, a place to which many wild and strange stories attached themselves. It was now covered in by means of a broad wooden cover, and any one sitting upon the stone ledge of the well could easily use the cover as a table—a fact of which the children in the neighborhood were not

slow to avail themselves. The man—a tall, sinister figure, with a long, black mustache, which curled upwards a little at the points—established himself with one knee on the stone ledge, and seemed rather to be observing his companion than conversing with her.

The girl had seated herself with her back to Brandon, so that he could not see her face ; but he saw that her hands were busy, for she had produced from under the cloak a bag—a brown leather bag, which he had seen in Joan's hand before—and from this bag she seemed to be producing various papers and packets, which the man contemplated with an evil eye. Brandon bit his lip until it bled, and bruised his hand against the stone wall in an agony of impotent fury. What business had Joan to be paying this man money?—for money it was that she produced—clean crisp bank notes and gold. She must have carried quite a hundred pounds in that little brown bag of hers.

She laid them down on the wooden cover of the well hurriedly, yet in a business-like way, and the man turned over the notes suspiciously, and gathered up the gold in his hand, as if to make

sure that the exact sum was being paid. Then there came a parley in whispered words, which Brandon could not hear. The man held out his hand for the bag itself, and she seemed to withhold it. Finally, with a passionate gesture, she drew from it another packet, as if she had kept it till the very last. In the faint moonlight that was touching earth and sea with silver Brandon beheld the packet torn open, and saw a little ripple of light fall from the girl's white fingers—a row of flashing, gleaming stones to which the uncertain light lent a curious beauty.

The man caught up the little glittering heap of diamonds and laughed aloud. Brandon could distinguish the triumphant ring of his laughter, and was not surprised to see the woman hide her face in her hands and apparently burst into tears. But a pang of the bitterest pain and anger shot through him when he saw the man throw his arm carelessly about her shoulders, as if trying to console her, and with his other hand take her face by the chin and raise it gently towards his own. For a moment the woman shrank away from him; then she seemed to yield, and let him kiss her, not only on the cheek, but on lips and eyes and

hair—wherever he chose. Indeed, her hands clung to him for a moment, as though she wished to prolong the embrace; and it seemed to Brandon in that moment as though he tasted the bitterness of death.

CHAPTER II.

THE ALARM.

THAT seemed to be the end of the business. The man took off his hat and made a sweeping bow, gathered up his spoils and bestowed them about his person, while the girl closed the leather bag, and fastened it again to her side, where it seemed to have been attached. Then, after a few hurried words, she crossed the grass-grown court-yard once more, with the stranger in her train. Their steps reechoed for a moment or two on the pavement at the entrance of the Tower, then died away, and Brandon was left alone.

"What does it all mean?" said Brandon to himself. "What was she doing with money and diamonds—she, who has always been poor, and has never had a store of jewels and ornaments such as many other girls possess? But that's not the worst of it. She might give him her money and

her jewels, for all I care; but her kisses—that's a very different thing. Joan, Joan!" he groaned to himself, "I could never have believed you guilty of so black a fraud!"

It was some time before he could pull himself together sufficiently to leave the ruin and take the path that led back to the Tower. When he was fairly started, however, he felt that it had been a mistake not to set off sooner. He might have tracked the stranger, or been at hand to protect Joan, in case she wanted assistance. But it would have been almost better if he could have faced her at once, and taxed her with her untruthfulness and infidelity. True, she was not engaged to him, but she had given him very thoroughly to understand that he had won her heart, and he had every right to reproach her. But, after all, would he reproach her? Was there not something undignified in the very idea?

It would be better, perhaps, to depart next day without saying a word, and leave her to the attentions of the lover whom apparently she was afraid to introduce to her friends. An ugly sneer passed over Brandon's face at the thought. Ashamed of him! Yes, that was, no doubt, the

fact. The man had not been devoid of good looks, so far as Brandon could judge. His pointed black mustache, his hooked nose, his dark eyes, might have charms for a woman. But he was unmistakably shabby. Although his clothes were well-cut, they were frayed and extremely shiny—a proof that he was in want of the assistance which Joan had evidently afforded him.

It was an intolerable thing, in Brandon's opinion, that Joan should secretly be in love with a man who came to her for money, and to whom she gave the trinkets which she must certainly prize, although she had never worn them in Brandon's sight. In fact, he remembered hearing his aunt lament over the deficiencies of Joan's jewel-box, and he had often thought that one of the pleasures of his future would be to wreathe that milk-white throat with pearls, and to see the colored fires of diamond and opal, emerald and amethyst, upon her beautiful neck and arms. His mind flew like lightning from one point to another. She had possessed these diamonds then, and had never chosen to produce them, but had handed them over to this man, who had probably applied to her for help.

Could he be a relation? But that possibility was almost out of the question. Joan's father, whom he had seen several times, was quite a different kind of man. She had no brothers, and also, he knew, no cousins. There was no one in the world who had the right to demand money and jewels of her, unless she had previously bestowed this right of her own free will. Surely she could not be privately married, and bound to obey her husband at any cost?

It would be useless to chronicle the wild and useless thoughts, the conflicting emotions and sensations which chased each other across Brandon's mind during his walk from the castle to the Tower. It was twelve o'clock when he reached the house, and he found the hall-door open and the old butler standing at the top of the steps. Geoffrey knew the old man well, but he would have passed that night without notice, had not Bingley himself begun to speak.

"I thought that you were lost, Mr. Geoffrey," he said, with the freedom of an old servant; "though, when I saw Miss Carrington run by just now, I knew that you must have been out for a walk with her. But, if you will allow me to

say so, sir, it's a bit late for a walk—more especial where a young lady is concerned."

"Has Miss Carrington just come in?" said Geoffrey huskily.

"Just five minutes ago, sir; and ran up-stairs as fast as you please. I thought that she had gone to bed, but it seems as if I was mistaken. The other ladies all retired early, sir, but I think that you will find some of the gentlemen in the billiard-room."

"Thank you, Bingley; I am going up to bed," said Geoffrey. And then he turned back to say: "You know the trains, don't you? Isn't there one at 10.40 to-morrow morning? You might order the dogcart for me. I have some business which calls me to town, so I must be off soon after nine o'clock."

"Sorry to hear it, sir," said Bingley, with solemnity. "Does her ladyship know, sir?"

"I will leave a note for her ladyship." And Geoffrey went up-stairs, rather afraid of Bingley's observant eye and pointed questioning. For he knew by this time that the old servant took the greatest possible interest in his affairs—and more especially in his love-affairs, of which every one

in the house was cognizant. The sense of publicity came home to him like a red-hot iron on the bare flesh as he went to his room.

Bingley stood and stared at him, then shook his head forebodingly.

"There's something wrong," he said to himself. "She hasn't never gone and refused him, when they've been courting all this time? Looks like it. Out together for two hours at the very least, and then to talk of going up to town so sudden. Well, it beats me!" And Bingley retired discomfited to his own domains.

But Geoffrey was not destined to carry out his plans. He packed his portmanteau, and breakfasted alone at half-past eight. But he was forced, after all, to give up the idea of leaving St. Romuald's that day.

He had had almost a sleepless night, and found himself almost unable to do more than drink a cup of coffee and eat a piece of toast at breakfast-time; so that the meal did not occupy him for very long. Just as he was rising from the table Mrs. Townley came into the room. She looked particularly pretty, as Geoffrey could not help noticing, in spite of a slight paleness and languor,

which gave a kind of softening to her usually vivacious style of beauty. She uttered an exclamation of surprise when she saw Geoffrey.

"So early, Mr. Brandon? I had no idea that you men breakfasted at this time, unless you were getting up early to kill something."

"I was thinking of going to London to-day," said Brandon, "which accounts for my early meal. But I might say the same thing about you. Surely you are not often down at this unearthly hour?"

"I was just going into the garden," said Nina, "to get a breath of fresh air before breakfast, when I heard the clink of cups and plates, and saw Bingley emerge from the room with a toast-rack, and I fancied that there might be a chance of coffee. I shall be so glad of a cup."

Chafing a little at the delay, Brandon, nevertheless, returned to the table and poured out a cup of coffee, while Mrs. Townley sank slowly into a low chintz-covered arm-chair, and bent her head to inhale the perfume of some beautiful roses on a low table at her side.

"How lovely the air is in this place!" she said. "I wonder we don't all get up before six o'clock

and go for a long walk before breakfast. I had a very bad headache last night, and went to bed directly after dinner. I think the air was close; but it is quite cool and fresh this morning."

"Your going off so early accounts for your early rising, I suppose?" said Brandon with a smile.

"Not altogether." Mrs. Townley looked down, and stirred her coffee slowly. "No; dear Lady Rockingham sent for me to her room before I was well awake, and it did not seem worth while to go to bed again. I expect she will send for you presently."

"Why, what's the matter?" said Geoffrey.

"Oh, she has simply mislaid some of her trinkets, and she thinks that burglars have been at work—or, at any rate, thieves," said Mrs. Townley dispassionately. "I must say I cannot see how burglars could possibly get to her jewel-case without more signs of disturbance. I should say that there were thieves in the house."

She raised her coffee-cup to her lips, and Geoffrey thought that she must be a little nervous, in spite of her calm tone, for the hand which held

the cup trembled a little, and she had to put it down.

"But this is rather serious," said Geoffrey. "My aunt would not summon you at this early hour without cause; and she must be seriously alarmed."

"It is in this way," said Mrs. Townley. "Her bedroom and mine are on a level, and there is a balcony running in front of the windows; so she sent her maid to ask me if I had heard anything in the night, or missed any of my own ornaments. I have so few," she went on, shrugging her shoulders, "that it is hardly worth while to ask me such a question; and if I had diamonds like hers I think I should never know another quiet moment."

"Diamonds?" said Geoffrey. His heart seemed suddenly to stand still.

"Yes; that's the funny part of it," said Mrs. Townley. "It's just one necklace which has vanished, and everything else is perfectly intact. I should imagine that her maid knew something about it."

"I should say that was impossible," said Geoffrey. "My aunt's maid. Why, she's been in the

family for the last thirty years, and is as faithful a creature as ever lived!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to say that she had taken it," said Mrs. Townley. "But she might have been careless, and left the jewel-case unlocked, or something of that sort, so that another servant saw it, and yielded to the temptation; though, in that case, I don't see why she didn't take the whole lot. Fancy being content with one necklace, when you might have a tiara, and a lot of other things as well!"

"Has Bingley been consulted?" said Geoffrey, moving towards the bell.

But Mrs. Townley's next words arrested him.

"Dear Mr. Brandon, don't give yourself any trouble until Lady Rockingham sends for you. She particularly did not wish the matter made public. She thinks there is something quite mysterious about the affair, and she wants to consult you first. She only sent for me on the spur of the moment, when she had just discovered her loss, and I am sworn to secrecy."

"I cannot think how she found it out so early in the day," said Geoffrey.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Townley. "But Lady

Rockingham always gets up early, and it seems she amused herself this morning by looking into one or two drawers and boxes which she usually leaves to the care of her maid. And in this way she discovered the loss of her necklace, which ordinarily might have been lost for weeks without her finding out that it was gone. Very tiresome and disagreeable, isn't it?"

"Very unpleasant indeed," said Geoffrey. He hesitated a little, took up his cup, and set it down again, as if not knowing exactly what he was doing, then said, in a decided voice:

"I think I had better not leave St. Romuald's to-day."

Mrs. Townley's face expressed a slight surprise.

"Well, I dare say your aunt will be pleased if you stay," she said, after a moment's pause, "though I don't suppose you can assist her very much in recovering the diamonds."

"Perhaps not," said Geoffry drily; "but I might try."

The message which they had half expected arrived at that moment.

"Lady Rockingham's compliments, and would

Mr. Brandon step up to her dressing-room for a moment, as she wished to speak to him?"

"That's it," said Mrs. Townley, with a knowing little nod and smile; "she's going to consult you. If I were you, I should advise her to put the matter into the hands of the police. Some people say the English police are so stupid, but I dare say they are clever enough for what you will require from them."

"It might be well," said Brandon, "not to mention my aunt's loss at all to any one in the house. Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Townley nodded assent.

"Of course, I only told you because I knew you would hear of it so soon," she answered; and Geoffrey quitted the room in order to make his way as quickly as possible to Lady Rockingham.

He found his aunt very smartly attired in an elaborate morning-gown, with her gray hair curled and frizzled quite as perfectly as usual, for under no circumstances would Lady Rockingham think of omitting the details of her toilet. But her face, which was still delicate and pretty, in spite of her fifty-odd years, was twitching with

painful agitation, and Geoffrey could see that she was altogether unnerved by her loss.

"I am afraid you have bad news for me this morning," he said, as he took her hand and kissed her, after his usual filial fashion ; for Lady Rockingham had been like a mother to him from the days of his boyhood, and he was genuinely fond of her.

"Oh, my dear Geoffrey, how did you know? I suppose Nina Townley told you? I don't want any one to hear a word about it until we have taken counsel together, for Mason declares that the thief must be in the house, while I think that a burglar must have got in, because who is there here who would ever think of attempting to rob me! Such a thing never happened to me before, and I don't like it at all. The burglar"—and Lady Rockingham was fairly trembling with agitation—"may come again any night, and we may all be murdered in our beds! I dare say he would have taken a good deal more if he had not been interrupted in some way."

"What is it you have lost?" said Geoffrey.

"Only one thing. That's the curious part of it. But it is the most valuable thing I possess.

You remember, surely, that necklace of diamonds which your uncle's grandfather brought home from India, which was presented to him by an Indian prince? And it is extraordinarily valuable. It is an heirloom, you know, and in course of time, Geoffrey, it would probably have become your wife's; so that, you see, the loss is yours, as well as mine."

"It is a great loss," said Geoffrey; and Lady Rockingham thought it very sympathetic of him to look so grave and pale. "You are quite sure you have not mislaid it!—that your maid has not put it in some place and then forgotten?"

"Oh, dear, no! Mason is very particular. Besides, I wore it only a week ago, and saw it put back into the jewel box. I don't know what made me look for it this morning, except that we were talking about diamonds last night."

"Oh, you were talking about them, were you?" said Geoffrey lamely. "That must have been after I went out."

"I suppose it was. You did not come into the drawing-room at all, did you? We were quite a small party, for Nina went to bed soon after dinner, and the rest of us followed a little later."

"Who was talking about diamonds, then?"

"Professor Fairweather began it, I believe. He and Joan were very much interested in the account of some manufactured diamonds which a friend of the professor's had succeeded in making. There was some discussion as to whether they would reflect light in the same way the real ones do. And we talked of the difference between diamonds from India and South Africa. But I don't think, Geoffrey, that has anything to do with the loss of my necklace."

"Of course not," said Geoffrey hastily, "unless one of the servants, or some stranger, perhaps, were listening. I am only asking questions in order to know exactly what happened. Did you send for your necklace to show them?"

"No, I did not," said Lady Rockingham. "I thought of it, and said I would wear it next evening, so that they might see the brilliancy of the stones to good advantage."

"And who were there," said Geoffrey keenly, "when you made that promise?"

Lady Rockingham considered for a moment.

"Nina had gone," she said, "and the others were dispersed about the room. The professor,

Joan, and I were sitting together near one of the windows. That was all."

"Near one of the windows," Geoffrey repeated mechanically. "And that was at what time?"

"Not later than nine o'clock, I fancy. We had just had coffee. The professor was very much interested in hearing of my Indian necklace, and so was Joan—though, of course, she has seen it many times.

"It seems rather mysterious," said Geoffrey, carefully avoiding his aunt's eye. "But I should say that this conversation was a mere coincidence, and that the theft had been planned long before. What did you do after that? I suppose Joan sang?"

"No, indeed, she did not!" said Lady Rockingham, in an injured tone. "She said she was tired, and would go into the gardens. And I thought that she looked as if she were expecting you, for I know that you often take a little moonlight walk together. But, talking about my poor diamonds, it was just that little discussion about them that made me go to my jewel-case this morning while I was dressing, for I wanted to see how the stones would look in the morning light."

"The case was locked?" said Geoffrey.

"Yes; I keep the key, with a bunch of others, on this little chain, you see. But I am afraid I am careless enough to leave the bunch on my dressing-table sometimes when I go down to dinner, and Mason generally finds it and puts it away."

"It is probable, then," said Geoffrey, "that the theft was committed while we were at dinner, and not afterwards?"

"Yes, or while Mason was at supper," said his aunt; "for she very often doesn't put my room tidy until afterwards. You see, she has been with me so long that I let her do things her own way."

"And in consequence," said Geoffrey, a little bitterly, "the diamonds are gone."

"Oh, but, Geoffrey, surely we shall get them back?"

"I doubt it," said the young man; "but we will try."

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

"I THINK," said Lady Rockingham pensively, "that we had better telegraph for James."

"James" was the name of her husband—a mild-mannered man, whose chief desires in life were to make his wife happy, and to employ his spare time in the destruction of game. He had very few other interests, and was completely under the control of his more active-minded wife; but in moments of emergency Lady Rockingham never failed to appeal to him for advice and assistance. In Geoffrey's opinion Sir James was no better than a good-natured figure-head; but he always upheld his uncle's position, and smiled approvingly at Lady Rockingham's occasional attempts to behave like an obedient wife.

"By all means, Aunt Charlotte," he said good-humoredly. "I will telegraph after breakfast, if you like. There is the gong. Don't you think

you had better go down and get something to eat, and we will discuss this misfortune of yours after breakfast? For the moment I don't think I would make the loss public. We shall have a better chance of discovering some trace of the culprit if we keep our knowledge to ourselves. I have told Mrs. Townley not to say anything, and I suppose Mason is safe."

"Mason is safe enough, I have warned her not to chatter. But I have also spoken to Bingley, whom we cannot very well leave out. And I think, Geoffrey, I must tell Joan and the professor, because, of course, they are expecting to see the diamonds to-day."

Geoffrey frowned a little, and bit his lip.

"If I were you I should say nothing even to them until you have talked it over with Sir James," he said. "We shall have to go into the matter very thoroughly, and the fewer persons taken into our confidence the better."

"Oh, yes, that's all very well; but you cannot expect me not to tell Joan," said Lady Rockingham. "No harm can come of that, at any rate; and surely, if Nina Townley knows, Joan may know too!"

Geoffrey did not see that it was exactly a good argument; but he followed his aunt silently down the broad, shallow stairs, and told himself that he must be very cautious, very discreet.

He was suffering tortures of suspicion and dread. Of course, he had no absolute proof that the diamonds which he had seen in Joan's hand at the castle well were the diamonds that his aunt had lost. In fact, he told himself over and over again that they could not possibly have belonged to Lady Rockingham's necklace.

At the same time, he was well aware that Joan's possession of such stones, unless she could very satisfactorily account for it, would be a suspicious fact in the eyes of an unprejudiced observer, and he thought it best to keep the matter as quiet as possible, so that he might not be compelled to put his own vague suspicions into a definite form.

He abandoned his idea of leaving the house, and seated himself once more at the breakfast-table; but, contrary to his usual custom, he planted himself at Lady Rockingham's right hand, and not beside Joan's chair.

She came in late, as he had half expected her

to do; but, to his utter stupefaction, she also came in radiant with life and good spirits, her face fresh as a June rose, and her soft eyes dewy with youth and gaiety beneath their curling dark lashes.

Geoffrey gazed at her from across the table with positive amazement. Was it possible that a woman could act so well and deceive so blithely. For even if she had not obtained the diamonds by foul means, it was at any rate certain that she had stolen out to meet a stranger in the castle ruins late at night, that she had presented him with money and jewels, and allowed him to kiss her with passionate fondness. If there had been a possibility that the stranger was a father or a brother, Geoffrey felt that he could have understood the situation. But he knew well enough that Joan had no brothers, and that old Major Carrington, with his red face and white mustache, could not possibly figure as the dark-browed, hook-nosed man who had been the recipient of Joan's gifts.

It was a puzzle, in which he felt himself utterly helpless. And yet it was necessary that an explanation should be forthcoming. He had meant to go away without a word, but if he were to be

detained at St. Romuald's on account of the loss of his aunt's diamonds, he must come to some understanding with the woman whom he had loved—whom, alas, he loved still, and would love, whether she were good or bad, to the last day of his life!

It was not so cheerful a breakfast-table as was usual at the Tower. Lady Rockingham's small vivacities were quenched; she said little, and glanced at her nephew now and then as if asking him to answer for her when she was addressed. With all his efforts, Geoffrey could not keep himself from looking somewhat grave and stern. He knew it, and would have given a great deal to have been able to assume a light and careless manner.

But his feelings were too deeply involved for that, and he could command neither his voice nor his countenance. Mrs. Townley seemed to share the anxiety which was felt by Lady Rockingham and her nephew. She sat beside Geoffrey, and spoke to him sometimes in studiedly soft and sympathetic tones, casting anxious glances at Lady Rockingham now and then as if to prove the depth of her commiseration.

She, too, was a good actress, Geoffrey thought

to himself with some cynicism, for the loss of the diamonds could not affect her personally, and yet she looked quite worn and haggard about it, as though it were her own misfortune. But Joan chatted away to the professor as if she had not a care in the world.

It was not until breakfast was over that she addressed herself personally to Geoffrey. Every one had strolled out of the dining-room into the hall, which was delightfully cool and restful in summer-time, and a favorite lounge for all inmates of the house. And Geoffrey was looking out of one of the deeply-embrasured windows, with heraldic devices traced in colors upon the diamond panes, when the girl came to his side and addressed him.

"Did you have a pleasant walk last night?" she said; and Geoffrey knew that she was holding out the olive branch of reconciliation.

"Tolerably, thank you. The air was very refreshing."

"So I thought, afterwards. I went out into the garden."

"So I heard," said Geoffrey rather grimly. "The moonlight was agreeable, was it not?"

She seemed to start a little at his tone.

"The moon rose so late," she said, with a touch of timidity, "that I did not get the benefit of its light."

"Excuse me," said Brandon, with chilling politeness, "but I think it had risen some time before you returned to the house."

"Had it?" she said, with a puzzled look. "I didn't notice. But I was in the house again before ten o'clock."

"Your watch must have played you false. Surely it was nearer twelve?"

He spoke with deadly significance. It would only be kind, he said to himself, to give her a hint of what he knew and what he suspected. Joan looked startled and troubled, but perfectly innocent, as she replied:

"Oh, I don't think so. I could not have been out so long without knowing it, and I think I heard a clock strike ten after I came up-stairs."

"I will not presume to doubt you," said Geoffrey. "It is, of course, much more likely that my eyes and ears deceived me. But it was midnight before I returned, and I had seen the moon rise over the sea from the castle well about eleven."

"That surely will tell her a good deal," he said to himself. "She will know now that I must have seen and heard more than she imagined. Perhaps she will justify herself and explain. For she must surely understand."

Perhaps it was the tone of his remark which brought the color to Joan's face. She drew up her head with a motion of something like offense, and answered in as cold a tone as his own.

"You must have been out, then, very late. But I do not think my eyes and ears deceived me as to the time of my return." Then she softened a little. "You are angry with me," she said, "because I did not come with you last night, and afterwards went out by myself. But indeed I did not mean to vex you, Geoffrey. Lady Carrington had asked me not to walk with you last night, because she wanted me to talk to Professor Fairweather, and it was only when he became quite absorbed in a game of chess that I stole away. I looked for you in the garden, but you were not there."

"No," said Geoffrey, looking at her keenly, "I walked towards the castle."

"Well, what of that?" she said, opening her

hazel eyes and laughing in his face. "You seem to think that there was something very remarkable about the castle last night. I wish I had been walking there with you. I cannot make a more handsome *amende* than by saying so, can I? You are not really angry, are you?"

For a moment she laid her hand on his coat-sleeve, a gesture which with her was very rare, and expressed a great desire for peace. She and Geoffrey had just entered upon that early, blissful stage in love-making when every small and almost involuntary action can be interpreted as a caress, and the most commonplace words are spoken in accents which bring them to the level of declarations of love.

A day or two earlier Geoffrey would have laid his hand upon hers, and imprisoned it for a minute or two, and she would not have been displeased. But on this occasion he let it lie on his arm for a moment or two and then draw itself away without any effort to detain it.

Again Joan was startled and almost indignant. Into her heart there crept a faint sensation of shame, as if her womanly instincts had deceived her, and she had made her love too cheap.

"It seems that you are angry," she said a little coldly, "though for what reason I cannot imagine. I have made my explanation, so I can say nothing more."

She moved away a pace or two, but Geoffrey, recovering from his momentary apathy, was almost immediately at her side.

"I am not angry," he whispered hoarsely, "but, if only you would trust me a little more. I am quite capable of helping you if you are in a difficulty, quite ready to be your humblest servant and slave. Only, don't distrust me—don't deceive me, Joan, and I will die sooner than see you come to any harm."

Joan looked at him in apparently unaffected surprise.

"I cannot imagine what you are talking about," she said. "I am in no difficulty. I am not in any special want of assistance. I don't distrust you, and I have never deceived anybody in my life."

With which reply, delivered with flashing eyes and a pale, haughty face turned unflinchingly towards his own, Joan waited for the apology which would usually come from Geoffrey's lips. But on

this occasion she waited in vain. Geoffrey looked at her despairingly, reproachfully; then turned away with something not unlike a groan, and left her to her own reflections, which were not of the most agreeable kind.

She did not notice for a minute or two that Nina Townley had drawn gradually nearer during the last few minutes, or that when Geoffrey left her she was standing almost at her side. But in a moment or two—filled for Joan with conflicting emotions—she was conscious of Nina's hand upon her arm and Nina's voice in her ear.

She had not known much of Mrs. Townley until they had both been guests this year in Lady Rockingham's house; but she had noticed a disposition on Nina's part to be friendly with her in a rather superior and condescending sort of way.

"Don't look so upset," Nina was saying in her ear. "Have you and Geoffrey been quarreling? He did not like your refusal to go for a walk with him last night, and he is not a very forgiving person, as you will see."

"I cannot help it if he is offended or not," said Joan, with some stiffness. "I was only doing

what his aunt asked me to do, and he has no right to blame me for that."

"Oh, no," said Nina, drawing her to a chintz-covered settee, and holding her hand affectionately as they sat down. "But you can never account for the ways of men. They are so exacting, and they think that they must come first in everything. He certainly looks a good deal put out; but perhaps that is on account of the burglary."

"What burglary?" said Joan.

"Didn't he tell you? I thought he would have taken you into his confidence at once. You remember the necklace that Lady Rockingham was talking about last night? It has disappeared, and nobody knows what has become of it. Lady Rockingham thinks that a burglar must have got in by the balcony, and taken it out of the jewel-box; but I expect it was one of the servants."

"What a loss for Lady Rockingham! She will be very upset about it."

"Oh, terribly! They are telegraphing for Sir James, I believe. Not that he can do much good, poor old man! But I suppose the next step will

be to put the matter in the hands of London detectives, and I expect"—which was entirely fabrication on Nina's part—"that they will be glad to have the house to themselves again, as there will be no end of bother about the affair. So I thought you would not mind if I gave you the hint."

Joan looked up at her sharply and suddenly.

"Do you mean that they want me to go?" she said in an oddly strained voice.

"Oh, not you alone—all of us," said Nina airily. "I may stay for a little while, perhaps; but I shall leave as soon as I possibly can. You see, I have to fit my visits one to the other, so that I cannot cast myself adrift at a moment's notice. But you have a home in London, have you not, so you could go there quite easily?"

"Yes, but my father is away," said Joan, in a voice which was filled with dismay. "Lady Rockingham kindly asked me for two months, and I have been here only three weeks."

"Well, you will find that all previous arrangements are upset," said Mrs. Townley, rising from her seat. "Of course, they won't say openly that they want their guests to go. But a word to the

wise, you know—I think they would think it a great relief if we all went home this evening."

"They will not need to give me such a hint a second time," said Joan, with her face aflame, and her heart full of mortification.

And Nina smiled maliciously to herself as she moved away.

"That's a very good move," she reflected, "for I can do a good deal when she is out of the house. And Geoffrey is beside himself already."

Meantime Geoffrey had gone into the more remote precincts of the house, where he sent a telegram or two, and transacted some business with the groom. It was on his return through the stone passage of this portion of the house that he came across one of the maids, who, as as he knew, was especially deputed to wait on Miss Carrington. Over her arm she carried the dark-blue cloak. For some reason or other Geoffrey stopped her.

"Is that Lady Rockingham's cloak, Lucy?" he said, knowing very well that it was not.

"Oh, no, sir! It is Miss Carrington's. I laid it out for her last night, because she usually puts it on in the evenings. But I am going to brush it now because it is all covered with dust. I cannot

think where she can have been to get it so dirty," said the girl rather petulantly.

Geoffrey lifted one corner of the cloak, and looked at it. Joan had told him that she had walked in the garden; but the dust which had left its traces on the dark-blue cloth, and even on its rose-colored lining, could not have come from any garden walk. It was the dry reddish, dust from the broken masonry and crumbling pavements of the old castle itself. Geoffrey let it drop with a sigh.

"It is a pity it was not brushed at once," he said.

Lucy tossed her head.

"It isn't very easy to brush things at ten or eleven o'clock at night, sir. Miss Carrington particularly told me last night to just leave out her cloak and not to wait up for her, as she might be late. And, indeed, I didn't know until this morning that she had used her cloak, for I found it lying in the hall."

Geoffrey said no more, and she departed, wondering in herself why he had asked her such unnecessary questions. But he had been trying to make sure of his facts, and he had wondered once

or twice whether he had been deceived by the outline and color of a garment, and whether Joan and her cloak had not been peacefully reposing at the Tower, while he had believed himself close beside them by the castle well.

CHAPTER IV.

JOAN SAYS "GOOD-BY."

SIR JAMES ROCKINGHAM arrived before long, and was moved almost out of his usual good-humor by the loss of his wife's necklace. He explained at some length to Geoffrey the manner in which it had come into his family, and the value he attached to it; and Geoffrey listened patiently, knowing the details perfectly well, but allowing the old man to have his way.

Sir James was nearly twenty years older than his wife; an upright, soldierly-looking man still, with white hair and mustache, but a little inclined to expend all his energy in words.

He assured Geoffrey over and over again that "something must be done, for your own sake, my boy, as well as mine. Why, that necklace was the most valuable heirloom in the family, and

I am not inclined to sit down and let it disappear without an effort to recover it. Now, what would you advise ?"

He thought that Geoffrey was looking rather odd ; he seemed pale about the lips, and anxious to avoid meeting his uncle's eye. But Sir James naturally attributed these symptoms to vexation on the young man's part at the loss of the diamonds, and was secretly pleased that his nephew should show so much feeling.

"The difficulty," said Geoffrey slowly, "lies in the fact that all diamonds are very much alike. If the necklace is broken up and the stones taken out of their settings, I don't see how it is possible to recover them."

"Ah, you have forgotten one thing, my boy," said the old man. "The clasp is unique. It is by that clasp that I expect we shall be able to trace the necklace. It is a very ancient bit of work—a peacock in tiny emeralds, on a background of brilliants—supposed to be Persian in origin. I don't suppose there is anything like it in the British Empire."

"It ought to be very easily traced, then," said Geoffrey in a depressed voice.

"Well, yes, I should think so. Of course, all the diamond merchants, pawnbrokers, and people of that sort ought to be warned. I suppose you know the tricks of the trade, Geoffrey? You can put the matter into the hands of the best detective in London, and I don't mind what expense I go to so long as the necklace is found."

Geoffrey paused, as if considering the matter.

"You want the diamonds?" he said. "Do you value them more than the clasp, or the clasp more than the diamonds, or must you have the whole thing back before you are satisfied?"

"Why," said Sir James, amazed at the question, "of course I want the whole thing back? But really, as you ask me, I believe I value the clasp more than the necklace itself. The diamonds were fine, and not easily to be replaced. But the clasp, as I said, was unique, and if I had to choose between the two, I would sooner have that than the stones."

They were sitting in the library, and Geoffrey was making marks on a piece of blotting-paper with a pen, and occasionally dotting down a figure as if he were engaged in some little calculation. Sir James watched him curiously.

"Are you thinking how much it would cost?" he inquired presently.

"Well, partly," said Geoffrey, with a laugh, putting down his pen.

He could not, of course acknowledge that the wild thought had flashed through his mind of sacrificing a part, or even the whole, of his private fortune in order to replace the diamonds that his uncle had lost. He would sooner do that than allow suspicion to fall upon Joan—even in his thoughts he would not go further than the word "suspicion," although he might have said disgrace.

But if his uncle wanted the clasp, that was a different thing altogether. He, Geoffrey, might buy diamonds quite as good as the stones that had been lost, but he could not replace the clasp unless he obtained it from the hands of the person who had stolen it.

He racked his brain to remember whether he had noticed any sort of clasp on the necklace which he had seen at the castle well. He could not in the least remember. The glittering stones had been visible enough, but at the distance at which he stood he could not see how they had

been fastened. The very fact that he did not remember noticing the clasp, which was sufficiently large to be visible even at a distance, inspired him with a ray of hope. Perhaps the stones that he had seen were not those belonging to the Rockinghams after all.

Why should he have concluded so hastily that it was the Rockingham necklace? It was quite possible that Joan Carrington had a diamond necklace of her own—possible, but not likely—and, of course, she possessed every right to do as she pleased with her own property. In that case there would be no question of dishonesty. The only problem that would remain to be solved lay in her relation to the man to whom she had given the diamonds and had allowed to kiss her on mouth and hair and eyes. It was the remembrance of those kisses that rankled in Geoffrey's heart more than the loss of the diamonds.

"I have a proposition to make," he said, pushing pen and paper from him and looking Sir James in the face. "I have, I must confess, some slight suspicion as to the person who has robbed you, but I don't feel myself justified in saying more."

"Eh, what?" interrupted his uncle. "You have a clue and you won't impart it to me? Come, Geoffrey, that's absurd. I must know all about it."

"I think you said just now," said Geoffrey quietly, "that you wanted me to make necessary inquiries and call in the aid of London detectives. If you mean that, you must give me authority to act as I think best, and the first thing that I shall advise is absolute silence and secrecy. Therefore, it would be foolish for me to impart to you any conjectures of my own until I am a little more assured of their truth than I am now."

"Well, well," said Sir James, slightly mollified, "there's something in that; and, of course, I have every confidence in you. Still, if I didn't mention it to your aunt, eh?"

"I would rather not speak at present," said Geoffrey, leaning back in his chair, "because, you see, Uncle James, if I am mistaken I shall throw suspicion unjustly upon the person of whom I am thinking. If you will give me leave to follow up my own clue, I think I could be able to help you more than any detective can do."

Sir James looked dubious, and tapped with his

fingers on the table. "I am sure you would do your very best, Geoffrey," he said; "but don't you think that an experienced man from London —some sort of Sherlock Holmes, you know, who would discover the thief by a mark on the window-sill, or a dropped shoe-button—would be more efficacious than your best efforts? Mind, in saying that I am not throwing any reflection upon you, but a man with trained instincts and experience in the ways of criminals might draw conclusions from very small things which you would never think of."

"I am afraid Sherlock Holmes has ceased to exist," said Geoffrey, "and our London police are not distinguished for their acuteness. Of course, sir, if you like to place it in their hands, I will leave it to them, but I would rather not have anything to do with it unless I manage the inquiry in my own way."

"Well, perhaps you are right," said Sir James, veering round, as he usually did, to the last opinion propounded in his hearing. "You young barristers get an insight into the shady side of life, I suppose, and, if you think you have got a clue already I should not like to put difficulties

in your way. Very well, my boy, I will leave it in your hands for the present. But, of course, you know, if you find that your efforts come to naught, and you would rather the police took it up, you will let me know ?"

"Certainly I will," said Geoffrey, with more heartiness than he had hitherto displayed in the interview.

He had been very much perplexed as to his duty, for in ordinary circumstances he knew that he ought to have informed his uncle of the transaction that he had witnessed at the castle well, and his conscience told him that he would have done so had the woman concerned been a maid-servant, or any person for whom he felt no particular regard. He was even now uncertain as to whether he should keep silence for more than a limited time. But it seemed to him that he could do more, perhaps, in the way of discovering the truth without the aid of the police than with it.

It was on the morning after Sir James's arrival that Lady Rockingham came to her nephew with a face full of distress.

"Do you know, Geoffrey," she said, "I am afraid we have given Joan great offense."

"In what way?"

"Well, I suppose it was because we did not confide in her," said Lady Rockingham, in an injured tone. "You know you warned me not to tell any one about the diamonds, and, although I said to myself that I should probably tell Joan all about it, yet it seemed that she heard the story first from Nina Townley, and I really think she considers herself aggrieved that Nina should know all about it before she did."

"That doesn't sound like Joan," said Geoffrey impulsively.

"Well, no, it doesn't," said his aunt. "But then she is behaving so oddly that I hardly know what to think. Has she quarreled with you, Geoffrey?"

"Not quarreled exactly, but I fear that I have given her some offense," said Geoffrey, looking down.

"Well, dear, couldn't you make it up again?" said Lady Rockingham comfortably. "You young people are always so particular whether you are right or wrong. Now, even if you are right and she wrong, it is really just as easy for you to go and apologize and pretend that you were mis-

taken, and all that sort of thing. I assure you, my dear boy, that it is the person who is in the right who always has to apologize in the long run. There is no deadlier offense than being wiser than your neighbors."

"You are quite cynical, Aunt Charlotte," said Geoffrey; "but I am afraid your advice is not much good to me at present. Joan is not a person who will easily forgive an offense."

"Oh, you cannot have offended her so deeply as all that," said his aunt, looking aghast. "I am sure you would never be anything but kind and considerate, Geoffrey. I suppose that is the reason why she talks of going away!"

"Of going away?" Geoffrey repeated in a stupefied way.

"Yes, she says that she must get back to London. That her father will be back, and will want her. She is quite resolved upon it. She says she is going up to London to-night."

Geoffrey looked grave. He could not help feeling that Joan's desire to escape from his aunt's house pointed again to her complicity, at least in the theft of the diamonds. If all the facts became public at any time, it would be a point

against her that she had quitted St. Romuald's so abruptly after the loss of the necklace had been made known. He was almost inclined to seek her out, and to advise her very strongly to remain. But on second thoughts he decided that, seeing she was offended with him, it would be better not to interfere.

"Nina Townley talked of going, too," said Lady Rockingham, in a tone of profound depression; "but I persuaded her to stay on. I believe people are afraid that there are burglars about, and that they will lose all their possessions. Our party is quite broken up. The Craigies are going to-morrow, and the Athertons have written to say that they cannot come, so we shall be quite deserted."

"Ask some more people," said Geoffrey, "and don't worry about the diamonds, Aunt Charlotte. I think you will get them back. But if I were you I would say as little as possible about your loss."

"I will do just as you advise, of course, Geoffrey; but one cannot prevent people from talking, and it is impossible to keep a thing of that kind quite a secret. And I must say that old General

Craigie seems to think it very odd that you don't at once place the matter into the hands of the police. You won't mind my saying so, will you, but he says that gentleman have no business to act as private detectives."

"I am quite of his opinion," said Geoffrey gloomily. "But at the same time, if I recover the diamonds for you without the help of a detective, I don't see why I shouldn't do it. The general is an antiquated old fossil!"

"So he is, dear," said Lady Rockingham, adapting herself to her nephew's mood very much as his uncle had done, for she was really very fond of him, and Geoffrey was a power in the family. But, at the same time, she thought it would be much more satisfactory if several policemen and a detective in plain-clothes, like those that figured so largely in the pages of her favorite novels, could have been sent for at once.

Geoffrey felt himself indeed in a dilemma. He was, in fact, acting in a way which might be called dishonorable, and which was certainly unprofessional. He could not bring himself to disclose the facts of which he had become possessed. He could not bring himself to believe that Joan

had committed a crime, and yet he saw that the evidence would be strongly against her if her proceedings became known. He made up his mind, therefore, to keep perfect silence, and, if necessary, to suffer suspicion himself rather than let it fall upon her, for he could not look at her candid face and her clear, limpid eyes without declaring to himself that she was as truthful, as frank, and as innocent as a child.

Meanwhile, Joan Carrington herself was a prey to very distressing emotions. Geoffrey had paid court to her most assiduously, and had entirely won her heart. Up to the moment of their interview in the hall she was quite prepared to accept him as her husband, and had only wondered once or twice when the avowal of his love for her was to come. His looks and words on the morning after the disappearance of the necklace had been a shock and a grief to her.

She could not understand him. She could not in the least imagine how she had offended, but it was plain that for some reason or other he was extremely angry with her, and had suddenly become cold as ice and impervious as steel to all her timid advances. And knowing him as she did, she felt

that he would not behave to her in that manner unless some extraordinary change had taken place in his feelings towards her. Was it possible that he had fallen a victim to Nina Townley's charms? She had once or twice suspected that Mrs. Townley was anxious to attract him, but she had hitherto felt perfectly sure that Geoffrey was beyond the reach of her blandishments. Now, however, her faith was shaken.

Evidently Nina was on the best of terms with him and Lady Rockingham, while Geoffrey treated her with cold indifference, and even Lady Rockingham betrayed some vexation when told of her approaching departure. But Joan was determined that she would stay no longer than was necessary in a house where she was not wanted; and, with the aid of Lucy, she packed her boxes, and made ready to catch the evening train.

"I can't quite get the marks out of that blue cloak of yours, miss," said Lucy, as she brought the garment back to Miss Carrington's room.

"What marks?" said Joan.

"You must have sat down in it somewhere last night, miss, for it was all over sand—that reddish sort of sand such as you see all about the castle.

I have often noticed it about my things when I have been about them ruins."

"But I didn't wear the cloak last night, Lucy."

"Well, some one did," said Lucy, "for I found it lying in the hall last night, as dusty and dirty as it well could be; and as I knew I put it out for you, I thought, of course, miss, as you'd worn it."

"No, the evening was too warm for it," said Joan, in a reserved tone. "I took only a light wrap. Perhaps some one else put it on."

Lucy thought it natural that the young lady should look slightly vexed and astonished; but she was surprised that Miss Carrington asked no more questions.

"If somebody else had been spoiling a beautiful cloak of mine," thought the maid, "I know I should have made a tremendous fuss about it. But there, Miss Carrington's not one to think very much about her clothes." In which remark she was altogether wrong, for Joan was rather fond of pretty things, and dressed simply and plainly on account of want of means, rather than from want of thought.

"Well, if you must go, dear," said Lady Rock-

ingham, with a touch of coldness in her voice, as she kissed Joan's cheek that afternoon, "of course, we cannot keep you. But I am very disappointed, because you promised to stay till the end of September. I cannot think why your father should want you at this time of year."

"Are you sure he is at home, dear?" said Mrs. Townley, in her suavest tones. "I had a letter yesterday from a friend who said that Major Carrington was in the same hotel with her at Blankenberghe."

Joan colored vividly.

"He is coming home very soon," she said, "and the house must be got ready for him, you know. Indeed, I am very sorry to leave, Lady Rockingham, but I find that I must go to-day."

"Well, you will have company," said Lady Rockingham. "Where's Geoffrey? You know he is going by this train, too, don't you? Rather fortunate for you, because it is so much nicer to have an escort."

Joan was pale enough now.

"I—I don't require an escort," she faltered. "I hope Mr. Brandon has not chosen this train on my account."

" Oh, dear no—nothing of the kind!" said Lady Rockingham briskly. " He is obliged to go up to London on this matter of the diamonds, you know," she added, in a loud whisper, which everybody overheard. " He is going to take the matter up, and track the criminals down; but we must not say anything about it, because he says that the whole thing ought to be kept a secret."

" I hope he will be successful," said Joan faintly. But her heart misgave her at the prospect of a railway journey to London in company with Geoffrey. Would he explain his behavior, or would he ignore her altogether, or treat her simply as one of his aunt's guests? She felt a sudden conviction that the journey to London would be to her a time of torture, and that it was possible that Geoffrey himself would be the torturer.

CHAPTER V.

EXPLANATION?

UNTIL she had changed trains at Perth, Joan saw very little of Mr. Brandon. He presented himself whenever his escort was needed, looked after her luggage for her, procured food at the station, and established her in the comfortable carriage, from which she need not move until she reached London.

She had announced her intention of traveling third-class; but at Perth she found her intentions overruled. Mr. Brandon took her ticket from her on some pretext of seeing whether it was correct, and proceeded to instal her in a luxurious first-class apartment with a slip of paper on the window showing that it was "engaged."

Joan remonstrated, but Geoffrey had handed her a first-class ticket, and told her that he was carrying out Lady Rockingham's wishes.

"My aunt objected to your going all the way in a third-class carriage," he said. "She thought that you would be very uncomfortable, and commissioned me to see that your journey should be as little fatiguing as possible."

He spoke in a quietly cold tone, which deprived Joan of any desire to argue the point with him. He continued in the same unemotional way.

"It is a corridor-carriage, you will perceive; but you will not be disturbed by other passengers, as I thought that you would like to keep it for your own use."

"But you will come, I suppose?" said Joan faltering, and breaking off with the feeling that she had uttered a sort of invitation which might be unwelcome.

"I generally travel in a smoking-carriage," said Brandon; "but I shall be happy to share the carriage with you for a little while, and when you want rest I will leave you. As we shall have it entirely to ourselves, we shall have time for a little conversation."

He looked her steadily in the face as he spoke, and Joan's heart quailed. If there had been time, she felt as though she would willingly have jumped

up from her seat and sought refuge in the most crowded third-class carriage on the train.

But it was too late to make any change. The train was already beginning to move, and Geoffrey was seated exactly opposite her.

The wheels ran smoothly, making little noise upon their way, the thickly-padded seats deadening movement and sound. The night had not yet fallen, and the western sky was serenely bright as seen from the wide windows of the compartment; but the colors were rapidly fading out of the landscape, and lights showed themselves here and there at cottage windows, gleaming over the shadowy fields.

Joan sat with a book upon her lap, but felt no disposition to open it. Her eyes were fixed immovably upon the moving panorama through which the train was passing, and she seemed unconscious even of Geoffrey's continued restlessness.

He moved his position several times, walked up and down the corridor, explored the neighboring compartments, and finally came back to his place with an air of determination which was by no means lost upon his companion, although she

did not seem to be aware of it. I am glad of this opportunity of speaking to you," he said, when the yellow light had almost faded in the west, and the lighted lamp in the roof was beginning to make itself visible. "It has fallen almost unexpectedly in my way and, if you will allow me, I should like to avail myself of it."

Joan lifted her serious, hazel eyes to his face.

"A railway-carriage is scarcely a good place for conversation, unless it is of the most trifling character," she said.

"What I wish to say is the reverse of trifling," he answered her. "If I had not known that you were coming by this train, and that I could secure a certain amount of privacy, I would have asked for a private interview with you before you left St. Romuald's."

"I should not have had much time to give you, I am afraid."

"In that case I should have sought you out in London."

The inflexibility of his tone began to strike her. She looked at him with a sudden widening of the eyes, which he took to proceed from fear. He averted his face from her with a sickening of the

heart which made him almost unable to proceed for a minute or two.

And, after a little silence, it was Joan who spoke, with a new but very gentle dignity of mien.

"You seem to have something important to say to me—or something, at least, which you consider important. It is perhaps as well that you have the opportunity now, and need not trouble to fix a future time."

"No doubt you wish to see the last of me!" said Geoffrey, with sudden passion. "I can quite well understand that you have no particular desire for my acquaintance."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Brandon? It seems to me that you are speaking in a very odd way—an unkind way, considering how long we have been friends and how kind Lady Rockingham is to me. I think it would be much better if we did not pursue this conversation!"

She opened her book, and bent her eyes upon it; but Geoffrey was not inclined to let her read in peace.

"Listen to me for at least a moment or two!"

he said imploringly. "For the sake of our old friendship, Joan——"

"I hardly think you have any right to appeal to that. You have not treated me like a friend!"

"I have cared for you too much to treat you like a friend. For the sake of my love for you, Joan——"

"Mr. Brandon!"

"Oh, you know it—surely you know it! I have loved you for years, Joan, and have been waiting only till I felt I was justified in telling you so! I came to Scotland this year fully resolved to ask you to be my wife, delaying from day to day simply because I dallied with happiness like a child that keeps its sweetest morsel to the last!"

"Why do you tell me this?" said Joan, turning very pale. "Why do you speak as if it were all so long ago?"

There was a kind of piteousness in her tone.

"Because it is so long ago!" said Geoffrey passionately. "It is centuries ago! There was a time when I believed that you loved me in return, and that you would be true to me. I have

learnt too late that I was mistaken, and I have no hope left; but I love you—to my sorrow, I love you still!"

He rested his brow upon his hands for a moment, supporting his elbows on his knee. When he looked up she was smiling, but with the tears in her eyes.

"Why should you think," she said, leaning forward a little, "that you were so mistaken?"

Geoffrey was silent for an instant; then drew back, his whole face expressive of repugnance.

"You cannot love me," he said, almost in a whisper—a whisper so fierce, however, that it was perfectly distinct—"when you love another man!"

"I? Another man?"

"You must love him," Geoffrey answered roughly, "or, being what you are, after all, a woman with a heart, a brain, a soul, you would not let him take you in his arms and—kiss you!"

Quick as thought the deep color rushed over Joan's pale cheeks; but still she faced her accuser steadily.

"Who says that I ever did such a thing?"

He meant to say, "I saw you"; but when it came to the point he hesitated and flinched from the truth. All that he could do was to answer, lamely enough :

"You were seen !"

"I could not have been seen, for the thing never happened !"

He wanted to say that he believed her ; but his eye fell upon the blue cloak which was lying on the seat beside her, and his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. She watched him keenly, and the doubt in his face drove her to a question :

"Do you not take my word for it ?"

He pointed with one finger to the cloak ; for the life of him he could not say a word. Joan drew back into her corner, and eyed him strangely.

Was he himself ? Was he insane, she wondered, that he should use such odd gestures instead of speaking ? She was utterly, and not unreasonably, perplexed.

"Where were you the night before last ?" he said at last. "You wore that cloak. You went to the castle well——"

"You are mistaken, Mr. Brandon. I did nothing of the kind !"

"But I saw you—I saw you! I was in the ruins, and I witnessed your interview with that man——"

"Mr. Brandon, are you mad?"

Geoffrey went on, almost unheeding:

"I did not hear what you said to him or he to you; but he kissed you, and you showed no indignation, no dislike. You allowed him to caress you——"

"I have listened too long!" said Joan. Her face was scarlet with anger, and her eyes flashed lightnings upon him. "I did not imagine I should expose myself to such insults when I traveled with you. I have told you already that you never saw me in such a position as the one you describe, and I ought not to have to say another word. I never will say another word. There is no reason that we should continue to be even acquaintances!"

"You mistake me," said Geoffrey. "I only ask to be disabused of a notion which is in itself almost incredible; but indeed, Joan, I had the testimony of my own eyes, and I thought there could be only one explanation of what I saw."

She put down her book and looked at him.

"Tell me what you saw ?" she said curtly.

"I saw you—you in that blue cloak——"

"I did not wear my blue cloak at all that evening !"

"I saw—some one in the cloak at the castle well. I had been walking, and was sitting in a corner of the old wall, where I had a good view of the courtyard and the well. I heard footsteps, and, looking up, I saw a man and a woman—the man, dark and pale, with a black, pointed mustache ; the woman——"

"Well, the woman ?"

"She was of your height," said Geoffrey haltingly, "and she wore that cloak. I could swear to it anywhere ! Her dress was white—like the one you wore that evening. Forgive me that I say so !"

She made a proud gesture, as if to wave away his apologies ; then asked shortly :

"You saw the woman's face. Was it my face ?"

Geoffrey paused.

"No," he said at last, very slowly ; "I did not see the face !"

"And you dare to condemn me on the strength

of a cloak, of a dress, such as anybody could wear? Your lively imagination makes you see me in any woman of my height and build whom you discover in a compromising position. And yet you say you love me!"

"I love you devotedly, madly, with all my heart and soul!"

"What kind of a love is it that does not know how to trust? I am sorry I ever listened to you—sorry I ever lowered myself by even denying what you accuse me of! Believe exactly what you please of me; I shall not condescend to excuse myself!"

"I have blundered! I have been an utter stupid!" said Geoffrey. "I was led away—blinded—by my first impressions, and I was overwhelmed. I thought you loved some man——"

"Would you mind dropping the subject, please?" said Miss Carrington, with great coldness. "I am not in the habit of talking about such things!"

"But I must speak!" said the young man, with increasing agitation. "You must listen to me, because I see a danger before you which it will take all our care and skill to avert."

"I do not wish to hear!"

"But you must hear—you shall hear!"

"Mr. Brandon, do you wish me to go into another carriage, in order to be free from you?"

"Joan——"

"I am Miss Carrington to you, if you please," she said firmly, "and a stranger!"

"No, that you shall never be!" said Geoffrey, his natural masterfulness getting the better of his contrition. "You can't be a stranger to one who has loved you as long and as well as I have done, who loves you now more dearly than anything in the world, and would give his life—his honor even—for you! I am your true and faithful lover, dear, and I wavered only because my eyes deceived me! Can you not forgive the mistake which caused me so much suffering?"

"Suffering!" said Joan, with a touch of disdain. "I saw nothing in your behavior which merited so good a word. Love is chosen by trust. If you could not trust me, you could not have loved me very much!"

"Are you not now doubting me yourself?"

"Yes; but I never said I loved you!"

"You do love me, Joan!"

He never forgot the scorn that flashed at him from her indignant eyes.

"I love nobody who distrusts me!"

"But I trust you perfectly!" he pleaded, a little illogically, it must be owned. "If you will but let me tell you the whole story——"

"I should prefer to hear nothing more!" said Joan, in an icy tone. "I think I have heard quite enough. It is growing late, Mr. Brandon; and perhaps you would like to smoke. There is a smoking-carriage at the other end of the corridor."

"If I am silent now," said Geoffrey, with considerable agitation, "it is only because I hope to speak to you on another occasion—to explain everything, and to put you on you guard——"

It was an ill-chosen expression. Joan blazed into sudden anger.

"That is quite enough, Mr. Brandon! I do not wish to be put on my guard—by you!"

There was nothing for Geoffrey to do but to withdraw. Joan was resolved not to hear him. He made his way to the smoking-compartment, and puffed at a cigar; but he did not feel inclined to sleep, and sat up, looking through the window

at the flying forms of phantom hills and meadows, of dimly-lighted houses and spectral trees.

It would have comforted him a little if he had known that Joan was lying on the seat with her face hidden in the blue cloak that had been the proximate cause of so much mischief, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and her whole form shaken with passionate sobs.

Geoffrey had secretly been the idol of her heart, and the idol was cast down from its pedestal. So Joan wept bitterly, feeling, as the young always feel, that no one ever sorrowed as she did, and that nothing in the world would ever bring brightness into her life again.

And after a time she slept, for she was very tired, and dreamed of Geoffrey; but Geoffrey, erect and rigid in the smoking-carriage, never closed his eyes.

And thus midnight came and passed, and the deep darkness of the small hours settled upon the silent land through which the engine rushed; and at three o'clock in the morning, when the first signs of dawn were beginning to show themselves in the eastern sky, there came a strange, muffled roar out of the distance, and a crash which jarred

the limbs of the sleeping passengers, and roused them into wild alarm and consciousness of terrible disaster.

Thus Joan struggled out of slumber, as it seemed to her, straight into a world of darkness and noise and devastation, and, on trying to move herself, found that she was a prisoner—not hurt, as far as she could tell, but pinned down to the floor of the carriage by débris of various kinds.

There was a rushing, roaring sound as of escaping steam; then there were loud shouts; and—worst sound of all—there were low moans and cries of agony.

The London express had run into a luggage-train, which had glided accidentally down the line from a siding, and it seemed as though both trains had been utterly wrecked by the collision.

CHAPTER VI.

NAN.

JOAN lay and listened in terror to the appalling noises with which the air appeared to be filled, and tried in vain to see what had happened around her, for the light had gone out, and the air seemed to be thick with smoke and steam. She did not realise until afterwards that her chief thought at that moment was for Geoffrey, and not for herself. Her whole heart and mind were absorbed in a terrible fear for him. If he were uninjured, she was sure that he would have come to her help at once, and the minutes that she spent in this state of suspicion seemed to her like hours. But at last she heard the voice she knew, and in spite of herself a great sob of gladness ran through her veins. She heard him calling her by name:

"Joan — Joan, are you there? Are you hurt?"

She managed to call back clearly: "No, I am not hurt, I think, but I cannot get out. Have you a light?"

He struck a match, and she saw his anxious face for a moment amid the surrounding gloom. He came as close to her as possible, feeling his way amongst the broken fragments of the carriage, and laid his hand at last upon hers.

"Thank God you are safe!" he said, in a tone of deep feeling. "I will get you out as soon as possible; but we must have a light first. I think you are safe for the present. Will you be afraid to stay here while I try to get a lantern, and ascertain what mischief has been done?"

"No. Go quickly!" she said. "Never mind me. There must be many others who want your help. Poor things! Some of the passengers must be dreadfully hurt."

"I am afraid so," said Geoffrey; "but I shall get you out first of all, and then you can help others if there is anything to be done for them. I don't think it ought to be very difficult to extricate you."

He hurried away, leaving her hand aching from the strength of his clasp upon it. But after

nursing it with her other hand for a minute or two, Joan carried the crushed fingers to her lips, and kissed them, as if in that way to repay the warmth of his greeting.

In a few minutes he was back again, and the flashing of a lantern told the girl that help was near. The guard came and looked at her, and one or two men, whose services Geoffrey had procured, began to pull away the shattered woodwork which formed a barrier between herself and freedom. It was very fortunate that the first shock had thrown her to the floor; for if she had been sitting, she would scarcely have escaped without injury.

As it was, she had escaped unhurt, except for a few trifling bruises; and after two or three minutes' energetic work the men released her sufficiently from the débris to enable her to get one limb after another quite free, and finally to emerge altogether from the remains of the compartment. She stood at last at Geoffrey's side, and her eyes fell upon a weird and awful scene.

The engine of the express was a mere skeleton. It lay helpless on its side, still, however, belching forth smoke and steam; while a lurid light

showed that the woodwork of one of the carriages had caught fire, and dark figures were working fiercely in the effort to extinguish the flames. Some of the carriages also lay on their sides—two or three were simply shattered into fragments—and from beneath the mass of woodwork and iron came the most heartrending of all sounds—the cries of those who had been injured and were unable to free themselves. There was a fear, too, that the fire would spread, and that a still more terrible death awaited those who lay imprisoned underneath the broken carriages.

"It is not a sight for you," said Geoffrey quickly. "There is a farmhouse, I hear, close by. Will you not go there and wait?"

"Is there nothing that I can do?" said Joan. "You are going to help, are you not? Surely I can be of some use, too?" And almost before Geoffrey could utter a protest she had left his side and dived into the very midst of the ruin, whence in a moment she emerged, carrying a child, whom she set down upon the grass. The little thing was uninjured; but Joan had seen its mother's face, and had recognized the fact that she would never claim her child again.

There were other cases of the same nature. One by one, men, women, and children were carried forth, for there had been a great amount of injury to life and limb, and the number of sufferers was almost unprecedented. They were not far from a country town, and several doctors were speedily on the spot, while every one worked with might and main to extricate the injured and carry them to some place where their hurts could be attended to.

Joan was soon busy among the sufferers. Geoffrey, working with a will amongst the other men, caught sight of her from time to time ministering to the wants of those who were in pain, and he reproached himself angrily for having at any moment suspected her of actions that were anything but sweet and womanly.

When the work of rescue was almost completed, and all those who had been seriously hurt were taken away, he came upon her in the early morning light, sitting upon a grassy bank, with the motherless baby in her arms, and her knee supporting the head of a young girl, apparently about fifteen or sixteen, who seemed to be unconscious. Joan looked up at him, and spoke, as he was glad

to observe, with evident forgetfulness of the terms on which they had parted the night before.

"Oh, Geoffrey," she said, "this poor girl is injured, and I don't know how. She had been left behind, but I managed to carry her away from the train, although she could scarcely walk, and now I am afraid she has fainted. Have you anything in your flask?"

Geoffrey knelt down and examined the girl's face, and moistened her lips with brandy-and-water; and, under Joan's directions, laid her perfectly flat on the ground. With this treatment the color gradually came back to her pale lips. She opened her eyes—dark, wild eyes they were—and stared about vacantly. Then, seeming to recover consciousness, she made a sudden clutch at her throat, which Joan noticed as peculiar, and sat up, gazing at her companions with the air of a hunted animal at bay.

"What is it?" she gasped. "What's happened? What are you a-doing to me?"

Her accent was provincial rather than cockney, and yet there was a twang about her speech which suggested the London girl. She was commonly but neatly dressed in a blue-stuff frock and a

close-fitting jacket. The straw-hat which lay on the ground beside her was a mass of artificial flowers, which had been soiled and limp before a falling beam had crushed them completely out of shape. There was a smear of blood across her forehead, and one of her wrists was red and swollen, and hanging limp, as though from a bad sprain.

"You are all right now," said Geoffrey reassuringly. "Let me look at your hand. Doesn't it pain you a good deal?"

She pushed back her sleeve, and looked at it wonderingly.

"It's awfully bad," she said. "It shoots like fire. I was struck on the head, too. I thought I was killed!" She shivered a little, and then laughed hysterically.

"You might have been killed," said Geoffrey, "but for this lady, who got you out of the carriage. But I don't think there is very much wrong with you now. I will get the doctor to come and look at your wrist."

The girl—she was rather pretty, Joan noticed, now that she did not look so white—looked after him silently, and then began to shake and cry, a

sure sign that her nerves were thoroughly unstrung.

"Are you hurt?" said Joan soothingly. "Tell me where you feel any pain, and I will tell the doctor about it. See whether you can get up and stand comfortably. There, I think you are all right," as the girl scrambled to her feet. "You will be better presently."

"I don't want him to bring the doctor," said the girl. He'd want me to go to hospital, perhaps, and I won't go! I can't go, I tell you!" She clutched Joan by the sleeve as she spoke. "They will be expecting me in London. I won't be kept here!"

"Nobody will try to keep you," said Joan. "Don't be frightened. We shall all go to London by another train—those of us who are able to go. Will your friends be waiting for you at the station? You can telegraph to them, you know, that you are safe."

"There will be somebody waiting for me, I am sure of that," said the girl, with an odd little laugh; "but I don't know whether you would call him a friend. He will be in a great way about me, I know. But there is the luggage!"

she wailed, as another thought occurred to her. "I can't go on without my luggage."

"Have you a box in the van?" asked Joan.

"No, it is a bag; but it isn't in the van. It was in the carriage. I must get the bag," said the girl, with a look almost of terror upon her small, pale face. "It is—it is very important. They will half kill me if I don't bring the bag!"

"We will see whether we can get it out for you," said Joan. "And if you speak to the officials about it, I dare say they will take care of it for you, even if we cannot get it now."

"I must get it myself if I can. Which was the carriage you dragged me out of, miss? Oh, I don't like to go near it, I am so frightened. But I must, miss. I must get the bag."

Joan could not help smiling a little. The girl's distress seemed to her ludicrously out of proportion; but, as Geoffrey came up at that moment with the doctor, she explained to him the nature of the girl's anxiety, and he at once volunteered to go and look for the missing piece of luggage.

"Though I expect it will be buried so deep that I cannot get it out," he said. "Show the

doctor your arm, there's a good girl, and I will go and look for this bag of yours."

The doctor examined the injured wrist, and pronounced it to be rather badly sprained; but while he was binding it up the girl's eyes followed Geoffrey with a sort of feverish eagerness, as if she were more intent upon his movements than the extent of her own injuries.

"He is a gentleman, isn't he?" she said, appealing rather wildly to Joan. "He wouldn't take it and go off, would he? He will bring it back safe if he sees it there?"

"I am sure he will do that," said Joan. And the doctor gave a sharp look at the girl, and remarked drily:

"Your bag seems valuable?"

To Joan's surprise the girl colored violently, and looked much too frightened and subdued to reply. However, at that instant Geoffrey emerged from the heap of splintered fragments, bearing in his hand a shiny, black-leather hand-bag, which certainly did not look as if it contained any articles of value. The girl held out her hands eagerly for it, and a glow of relief lighted up her face.

"That's it! That's mine!" she added. "Thank you very much, sir."

"It's pretty heavy," said Geoffrey, looking at it critically. For the life of him he could not help thinking that it was very like the bag which he had seen in the hands of the woman who had personated Joan at the castle well. But, after all, black bags of that character were extremely common, and there was not the slightest reason to suppose that its owner had anything to do with the mysterious couple who had met by moonlight at St. Romuald's to give and to receive a treasure of diamonds and gold.

It was heavy indeed. When the girl received it, it was plain that she could hardly support its weight with one hand. Yet, as the other was useless, she was obliged to carry it as best she could. Geoffrey good-naturedly offered to hold it for her, but she refused his offer with so fierce a gesture of repulsion that he turned away, feeling half amused, in spite of the scenes of pain and suffering which he had just been called upon to witness.

He spoke to Joan, telling her of the arrangements that had been made for the convenience of

the uninjured passengers. They could either rest for a time at the farmhouse of which he had previously spoken, or they could go on to the nearest town, whence, after a short delay, they could be conveyed by special train, if they desired it, to their destinations. Joan elected to go on at once. She could be of no further use, and she was anxious to get back to her own home. Her only anxiety was for the poor little child whose mother had been killed in the collision. Rather to her relief, however, it was claimed by the dead woman's sister, who, although injured, was now able to make inquiries about her relations, and Joan therefore confided it to the care of its aunt. Then she made her way with Geoffrey to the point further up the line where carriages were waiting to take them to the nearest station; and it was not until they were on the point of stepping into one of the apartments that she discovered that the girl whom she had befriended was close behind her, toiling beneath the weight of the heavy bag, which, however, she would let no one else touch, and seeming only anxious to keep as close to Joan as possible.

"What are you going to do?" Joan asked her

kindly. "You want to get to London as quickly as you can, don't you?"

"Yes, if you please, miss." She evidently thought that Joan was able to compass everything she chose.

"Get in here with us, then," said Joan. "We will see that you get into the right train. You can put your bag down and rest."

The girl uttered no word of thanks, but she seemed glad to rest, for she still looked white and shaken. Cups of milk and coffee were handed round amongst the passengers, and Joan, who could hardly taste her own, was pleased to see that the girl ate and drank hungrily.

"What a curious little thing she is!" she said to Geoffrey. "I don't fancy she realizes the suffering and misery around her. Her thoughts seem concentrated on this mysterious black bag."

"Yes, it is curious," Geoffrey agreed. Then, after a pause, he added in Joan's ear: "I should rather like to know her name. Do you think you could get to know it while you are talking to her?"

"Oh, I will ask her," said Joan.

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"I don't fancy that she will tell you if you ask her in too straightforward a manner. If you could manage to make friends with her, and induce her to tell you where she lives, I have a fancy that it might be worth while for us to know."

"But why? What could she have to do with us?" said Joan, opening her eyes.

"It's the merest fancy," said Geoffrey, smiling back at her. He was delighted to find her so friendly and so sympathetic; but he did not want to tell her the exact reason why he desired a knowledge of the girl's name and address.

The girl was traveling not from St. Romuald's, but from a place close to it. He had seen her get into the train at a little station not five miles south of St. Romuald's. Could it be possible—although the thing seemed so unlikely that he did not like to mention it—was it possible that she, with her mysterious black bag, about which she was so anxious, could be connected in any way with the persons who had stolen Lady Rockingham's diamonds? Geoffrey felt that he would give a good deal to know the contents of that bag.

Joan, across whose mind no shadow of suspicion flitted, was somewhat surprised at his request, but

did her utmost to gratify it. After all, it was not very hard to win the trust of the pale-faced girl with the big, dark eyes, and the twitching, restless features which so clearly betokened a nervous disposition. Her name was Nan, she speedily informed her friend—Nan Cronin, and she had been staying in Scotland with her aunt, but was now going back to her home in London.

"And have you a father and mother living?" Joan asked gently, as they sat side by side in the special train that thundered southwards, as if to make up for the time that had been lost.

Nan's face clouded over.

"Mother died when I was a baby," she said; "and father, too. I live mostly with my uncle, and he's a bad 'un—as bad as they makes 'em, I can tell you!" she added with sudden sharpness, which struck Joan as rather distressing.

"I hope he is kind to you?" she said.

"Oh, pretty fair," said Nan vaguely. "He doesn't hit me very often; but of course, when he is in a regular wax, there's no holding of him. It isn't him that I am frightened of," she added in a lower and more confidential tone. "It's his son Josiah. Mr. Josiah I have to call him,

because he says he won't have a brat like me calling him by his first name. Mr. Josiah's real hard, he is. Uncle, he does give me a shilling or a kind word now and then, but Josiah never."

"And does he live at home with his father?" said Joan, who was becoming genuinely interested in the revelations of this lonely little maiden.

"Oh, bless you, miss, Mr. Josiah's much too grand for the likes of us. He lives in a flat somewhere in Kensington, I have heard; but I don't rightly know where, because he is so afraid lest we should go and see him—uncle and me. But uncle knows better than that, and wouldn't like to intrude. Mr. Josiah comes to us every Saturday, when the shop shuts up, and he looks at the things uncle's bought in the week, and gives his opinion."

"What sort of things?" said Joan.

The girl's eyes dropped, and her manner suddenly changed. "Oh, mostly old rags," she said indifferently—"old clothes and uniforms and broken china. Josiah, he keeps his eye on the books, and uncle has to tell him about all the sales, don't you see?"

"And where is your uncle's shop?" said Joan.

"I should like to come and see you some day."

Nan looked positively aghast.

"Oh, you wouldn't do that, would you, miss? Uncle wouldn't like it. We don't have any visitors. He wouldn't like me to tell you where he lives—only it is down Pimlico way, and not very hard to find, neither. If you tell me where you live, miss, I will come and see you some day, and tell you how we are getting on." And the pale little face lighted into a smile which was far sweeter than Joan could have imagined beforehand.

"Yes, do come and see me," said Joan earnestly. "I should like to know how you are getting on. You must come to tea some day, and then we can have a nice talk."

In her heart she was so far interested in the girl that she was already devising means for getting her away from the dull, drudging life to which she was accustomed, and she had almost forgotten Geoffrey's desire in her wish to brighten the girl's existence.

Geoffrey did not show any further sign of interest in the girl. He helped her out of the carriage

at St. Pancras, and then turned to assist Joan, who was far more important to him than any other person in the world. Nan scarcely stopped to say good-by, but scudded along the platform as fast as her feet would carry her.

"Look!" said Joan suddenly. "Some one has met her. Poor little thing! I wonder if that is the Cousin Josiah of whom she spoke?"

Geoffrey looked round, then he uttered a violent exclamation, and dashed in the direction in which Nan and her companion had gone. But they had been too quick for him. They must have got into a cab and driven off; for when Geoffrey reached the door, and stared blankly out of the gloomy portico, he could see no sign of either of them, and had to return crestfallen to Joan to explain his strange conduct as best he could.

But he did not tell her why he had been so startled, or why he had made that sudden rush in pursuit of Nan. For he did not like to inform her that the friend who had met Nan at the station was none other than the man with the pointed, black mustache, who had received the diamonds from a woman's hands at the castle well.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE GARDENS.

If it had not been for the suffering involved for other people, Geoffrey could almost have welcomed the catastrophe to the trains. The mere fact of their being involved in a common disaster brought him nearer to Joan, and he saw with delight that her manner towards him had grown softer, and that she did not repulse his timid advance towards friendliness.

He was afraid to go very far; but he ventured to ask, before he said good-by to her, whether he might be allowed to call.

"To call?" said Joan.

There was visible hesitation in her manner, as betokened by the repetition of the phrase.

"Yes, I may come some day, may I not?"

"I dare say my father will be at home," said Joan, without a smile.

"And you?"

"Oh, I can't say!"

"But you will let me call myself your friend—and forgive me?"

"I don't know," said Joan, looking away from him. "You are taking me at a disadvantage. We have both been through a great peril, and you helped me—perhaps you even saved my life—so that I cannot speak exactly as I spoke before——"

"That is something to be thankful for, at any rate!" interpolated Geoffrey.

"But I may remember afterwards that you doubted me."

"Don't remember it, Joan, please don't! I never wilfully doubted you for a moment; I was only perplexed. Forgive me! You shall never have cause to complain of me again in that respect."

She smiled a very little, and she gave him her hand for a moment; but she would not speak. Nevertheless, he went away with a much lighter heart, for he did not think that she would smile if she did not mean ultimately to forgive.

He remembered afterwards that he had not asked her for Nan's surname and address, or

for the little details of her life which the child seemed to be pouring into Joan's ready ear.

He had held himself aloof at the time, seeing that she had a vague suspicion of him ; but he was rather amused by this, and pleased to notice her trust in Joan. And it would be a good reason for asking to see Miss Carrington when he called.

His conversation with Joan, followed by the railway accident and her friendly attitude towards him, occupied his thoughts for the greater part of the day and night. It was not for twenty-four hours that his mind reverted with any degree of attention to the fact that the mystery of the robbery was as great as ever, and also that it was quite possible that suspicion might attach itself to Joan.

There was that horrible bit of circumstantial evidence—the blue cloak worn by a woman who in height and figure was Joan's match. He heartily hoped that the garment had been ruined in the railway accident and would never be seen again.

But things that are not wanted have an unpleas-

ant habit of turning up at wrong times and in wrong places; and he felt morally sure that that wretched cloak was for the time being indestructible.

A letter from Lady Rockingham added to his anxiety of mind:

"We were indeed thankful," she wrote, "to hear that you were not injured in that terrible railway accident. Poor, dear Joan must have been dreadfully shaken, and I am glad you were able to be of use to her. I feel rather lonely at present, for Nina Townley has now been obliged to leave me, as she had to go to London about some shares; but I hope that she will return to me later on. Have you yet obtained any information about the diamonds? I think you said you had a clue"—here Geoffrey blushed for very shame—"and I hope you will follow it up as soon as possible."

"And yet I have a clue," said Geoffrey, laying down the letter reflectively; "but it is not the one I thought of when I said the word. That man with the black mustache—that is my clue; and if Joan can trace the girl, we may be able to run

him to earth. I wish I had acted upon my suspicion, faint though it was, that she had something to do with the robbery. The services of a detective might have been useful, after all."

So Lady Rockingham seemed to think.

"Do you know," the lines ran on—"do you know that there is an excellent police inspector in our neighborhood, who has, James says, 'the makings' of a very good detective? He has found out all sorts of mysteries and traced no end of clever thieves; and he came over the other day for a little informal talk with James about this very mysterious business. We told him, of course, that the management of the affair was in your hands, but your uncle seemed to think that you might like to consult him later on. Personally, I think the man took too much upon himself, for when James and I were out of the way he began to question the servants, and especially Lucy, about the visitors who had been staying in the house and their habits—whether they went out at night, and so on. I was very angry with Lucy for answering him; but your uncle said it was all right, and that the man was only doing

his duty. I hope you will be able to send us some good news before long; and I am, dear Geoffrey, your affectionate aunt,

"CHARLOTTE ROCKINGHAM."

"They are growing impatient," said Geoffrey, "and I have been rather supine. I must see Joan to-morrow, and then I will find out the girl and see whether I can track the man. Of course, my seeing the diamonds is not proof positive; but if one could find out something about the Indian clasp, it would clear matters a little. Shall I write to Joan to-night? No; I must see her. She can tell me what I want to know by word of mouth better than by letter. And I shall see her; that's one advantage."

His eye lightened at the thought; he was exhilarated by the very prospect. As for the local detective, far away at St. Romuald's, carefully piecing little bits of facts together and forming a connected theory out of his patchwork, Geoffrey did not trouble himself about him.

He was quite convinced that the threads were in his own hand, and that sooner or later he would be able to track the thief, man or woman,

who had got possession of Lady Rockingham's diamonds.

He was in the mood for a little amusement, for the sensation of relief that had come with renewed confidence in Joan had gone to his head like wine.

For one evening at least he thought that he might amuse himself. The difficulty was to find anything amusing at that time of year.

It happened, however, that the exhibition at Earl's Court was still open, and the gardens illuminated every night; a good band was playing, and a walk amongst the trees and flowers would be decidedly pleasant.

And while he was thinking over the matter, a friend entered, and brought him to the point of decision by announcing his own intention of amusing himself that evening.

The two men dined together, and then made their way to the exhibition, where Captain Sutherland, Geoffrey's friend, had made an appointment to meet a party of relations from the country, amongst whom was a girl to whom he was more than half engaged.

The plan did not seem quite so enticing to

Geoffrey, with the accompaniment of his friends' relations; but he consented to go on, perceiving that Sutherland really wanted him to divert the attention of an elderly aunt from his beloved Amy.

Sutherland did not put his desires into words, but they were sufficiently obvious. Geoffrey laughed to himself, and played his part to perfection.

But as the evening drew to an end he grew a little tired of the elderly aunt's raptures, and slipped behind the party for a moment's respite, feeling that he had surely done enough.

He was close to the illuminated fountain, which threw its varying tints in colored rays across the crowd; and while he lingered with his eyes on the rainbow tints, in which he took an almost boyish pleasure, he suddenly was certain that close beside him he heard a familiar voice.

"What nonsense it is to waste one's time in looking at these ridiculous lamps! Why couldn't we have amused ourselves more sensibly?"

The voice was the voice of Nina Townley. Geoffrey remembered his aunt's letter, and that Mrs. Townley had been obliged to come to London on business.

He turned swiftly, intending to speak to her, if she were not too much occupied. He saw her, close to him indeed, but with a companion whose presence made him silent with astonishment and a kind of dismay.

She was walking with the man into whose hands Geoffrey had seen the diamonds placed at the castle well.

This time there could be no mistake. He was not misled by the accident of a dress, a cloak, the line of a figure. He had noted the aquiline features, the dark eyes, the long, black mustache, with waxed and pointed ends, only too well.

When he had thought that the stranger was Joan's lover, he had marked every line of his face with jealous care, and he knew that Nina's companion was the self-same man.

What was he doing here with Nina Townley, the friend of Lady Rockingham? How did Nina Townley know him well enough to speak to him in so familiarly petulant a tone?

Nina herself was looking remarkably pretty in a fashionably-made orange-yellow dress, with a black feather boa round her neck, and a large hat of black lace and yellow roses.

It was a daring costume, but it suited her admirably, in spite of one's innermost conviction that it ought not to suit any one but a brunette.

Her hand was lying loosely on her escort's arm. There was an unmistakable air of possession about her, as if she had a right to his attention and support. And the man himself had the appearance of a gentleman.

He was well-dressed and well-groomed; but there was something in the deep lines of his sallow face, in the turn of his head, the quick and almost furtive movements of his eyes, which gave Geoffrey a feeling of intolerable repulsion.

He drew back. He did not like to speak to Mrs. Townley while she was in that company. But their eyes had met, and from the indefinable change that came over her face, Geoffrey saw at once that she had not expected to meet him, and that she was ill-pleased at the encounter. He lifted his hat, and moved away, but not so quickly as to miss her look of absolute terror nor the clutch which her fingers made on her escort's passive arm.

"Julian, let us go! Come away at once!" These were the words wafted to Geoffrey's ears

upon the evening breeze—"at once! For Heaven's sake, make haste!"

"What's the row?" was the drawling answer. "Nobody here we know, surely? Nobody who knows me, at any rate, my dear."

She almost dragged him away, and Geoffrey, glancing back, wondered whether it was the electric light that made her look so pale.

He lost sight of them immediately, and then wished that he had spoken to her, followed her even, as she went towards the gate. But he shrank from thrusting himself upon her. Nature, in fact, had never meant Geoffrey Brandon to play the part of a detective, and he did not play it very well. Some sentiment of honor, of pity, of sympathy was apt to spoil his efforts at the most critical moment of all.

But he did a thing which would very much have alarmed Mrs. Townley and her friend if they could have seen it done.

After a moment's reflection, he sat down on a little green chair, drew a note-book from his pocket, and with a small and very inadequate pencil began rapidly to sketch the face of the man that he had seen.

He had been noted from his boyhood for his knack of catching likenesses; and in this case the likeness was easy to catch, because the man's features were marked, and the fashion of his hair easily recognizable.

He drew it as carefully as he could, giving value to every line; and on another page he sketched a less careful, but just as striking, likeness of Mrs. Townley. Then he closed his note-book, replaced it in his pocket, and looked for his friends, who were not very far away.

He was thoroughly perplexed; and he might have been still more perplexed if he could have listened to a conversation which took place that night between Mrs. Townley and the man whom she had addressed as "Julian."

They had driven away from Earl's Court to the dainty little flat which Nina occupied when she was in town; and, in her pretty, miniature drawing-room, she threw off her hat and boa, and confronted her companion with consternation written on every line of her delicate little face.

"Do you not know," she said vehemently, "who that man was?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know?"

"You ought to know. It is dangerous for you not to know. It was Geoffrey Brandon, Lady Rockingham's nephew—Sir James's heir."

"All right! Don't excite yourself, my dear girl. He does not know me by sight, so what was there to astonish him? You are at liberty to go to Earl's Court with one of your friends, are you not? Tell him I'm your brother—long-lost brother from Australia. He would believe it, and be happy."

"I might, if it were not for Lady Rockingham. She knows that I have no brother."

"A cousin, then; I'm not particular. Why should you be so nervous about him?"

"He is in love with Joan Carrington, that is all. He will move heaven and earth to prove her innocence if once he gets an inkling of the truth. At present he is inclined to think her guilty, because he thought that he saw her at the castle well."

"That was rather a cute trick of yours, Nina; but I never thought he would be so easily taken in. Still, you don't know that he was actually deceived."

"They quarreled next day," said Nina curtly.

"He would hardly speak to her; he was as white as a sheet. If the Rockinghams were not such ninnies, they would have thought that he had taken the diamonds himself."

"Why didn't you lay it on his shoulders? You are clever enough," said the man, throwing himself down upon a comfortable sofa.

"It was easier to fix it upon hers. I said enough to Lucy and to the detective to set them upon her track before I left St. Romuald's. But I think we shall have to clinch the matter, Julian. He saw you at the castle, you will remember. It was unlucky that we did not perceive him until it was too late to draw back; but Joan Carrington's cloak kept him quiet. He recognized you to-night, and was shocked to see me in such company."

The man laughed aloud.

"Give me some refreshment," he said, "and tell me what we are to do next."

Nina fetched a tray of bottles and tumblers from a side-table, and proceeded to mix for him the drink that he preferred. The little interlude gave her time to think. It was with an air of profound wisdom that she spoke at last.

"Major Carrington is always in and out at Cronin's. Cronin lends him money, I believe. Get Cronin to involve the major in some way. Give him one of the notes—the numbers were all taken, I believe—or make him a present of the Indian clasp."

"Why, that is the most valuable asset of the lot!"

"And the least easily negotiable. It can be traced anywhere. We shall have to get rid of it. Let Cronin put it into Major Carrington's possession, and nobody will believe any story that the major tells about it afterwards. So easy for him to romance, you know, when, naturally, he got it from his daughter. A most dangerous piece of evidence."

"Then we shall lose it altogether?"

"Oh, not necessarily. I dare say we can get it back from the Carringtons. But it is not a thing that we can dispose of openly, and it is really rather a dangerous possession, because it is so absolutely unique."

He pondered for a minute or two, as he lighted a cigarette.

"Perhaps you are right. You have a good

head, Nina. But, you know, if the Rockinghams try to prosecute, the case against the Carrington girl is sure to break down. There isn't a jot of real evidence."

"I am not so sure of that."

"Why do you hate her so? You want to get your knife into her, I can see."

"I don't know," said Mrs. Townley. "There is something about her that rubs me the wrong way. She is so candid, so demure, so intolerably good—not to say goody-goody. I can't bear that style of girl. It would be the most amusing thing in the world to see her condemned to penal servitude for robbery."

"It won't come to that," said the man, rather uneasily. "We don't need it to go so far, Nina. We only want to divert suspicion until Cronin gets rid of the stones and raises money enough for us to leave the country."

"I am not so sure," said Nina.

"It is very edifying to see the way in which you women love one another," said the man called Julian. "But she is too handsome a girl to go to prison."

Nina's eyes flashed angrily. She said nothing; but at that moment she felt as though she could willingly have strangled Joan Carrington with her own hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INDIAN CLASP.

GEOFFREY found it difficult to wait until the proper hour for making a call, so great was his desire to see Joan, and to obtain all the information that she could impart to him.

The only thing that qualified his eagerness was the conviction that it would not be a very pleasant task to put her into full possession of the facts; but it seemed to him to have now become absolutely necessary that he should confide in her, even at the risk of exciting her anger against himself.

It was with a mixture of feelings, therefore, that he presented himself on the following afternoon at Major Carrington's door.

Joan and her father lived in a narrow little house wedged in between two larger ones, in a side-street of Mayfair.

The house itself was dear and inconvenient, but it was in an admirable situation, and Major Carrington was a man who liked to be in the world. He was a prosperous-looking, well-set-up, elderly man, with snow-white hair and a bristly, white mustache.

He was always smartly dressed, with the latest thing in waistcoat and ties; but at the same time it was well known that he was extremely impecunious, and that he would have fared very badly but for the good management of his daughter.

Joan economized for him, prevented him from running up long bills, and temporized with the creditors when they clamored for money; and, strange to say, these inconveniences did not seem to decrease her love for her father, who, in her, eyes was the most gallant soldier, the most chivalrous and honorable of men that ever existed.

The world, however, said some rather hard things now and then of Major Carrington. It said that he was a little too fond of cards, a little too fond of drinking, and not averse to making foolish bets, which he did not know how to pay.

But Joan was blind to all her father's defects,

and he, in return, was proud of her beauty and her cleverness, and extremely affectionate in manner when he was at home.

Geoffrey walked up-stairs with a sense of elation at his heart, but he was rather disappointed to find not only Joan, but Major Carrington in the drawing-room, and a couple of friends who had dropped in to tea.

Fortunately, the friends did not stay very long, and when they were gone, Major Carrington turned with a look of glee to his guest, and said :

"You have come at the right moment, Brandon. Joan and I have set our minds on a little bit of amusement for the evening. It is her birthday, I must tell you, and we are going to dine at the Café Royal, and go to the Gaiety afterwards. Now won't you join us ? We shall be delighted if you will make one of the party."

"I am afraid I shall only be in the way," said Geoffrey, glancing at Joan.

But she gave him just enough of a smile to restore his courage, and he ventured to accept the invitation, with the consciousness that it might not be altogether disagreeable to her.

"I wish I had known it was your birthday," he said to her reproachfully.

"I am very glad you did not," she answered, "though I don't mind having your good wishes."

"You have them now and every day," he said, with a fervor in his tone.

But Major Carrington, who had been fussing in and out of the room, now returned with a beaming countenance, and a small package in his hand.

"I have been waiting for this all the afternoon," he said. "I dare say, Joan, my darling, you wondered why your old father did not make you a present this morning? He had thought of it, nevertheless, and had been wondering what would suit you best. So here's your present, and, fortunately, it has come before the day was over."

He handed her a morocco case, and bent down to press her forehead with a kiss, which Joan returned as she thanked him.

"Open it—open it!" cried the major, "then we shall see whether you like it; and if it meets with your approval, my dear, you can wear it tonight."

Geoffrey caught the expression of Joan's face as

she looked at the morocco case, and knew instinctively that she was a little sorry that her father should have gone to the expense of a costly present, for such it seemed to be.

The case was elaborately gilded, and there was a gleam of white satin and blue velvet as she raised the lid, which showed that its contents were deemed worthy of a luxurious setting.

"Oh, father, it is lovely!" said Joan, in rather a subdued voice; "but I wish you had not taken so much trouble."

Geoffrey felt that she would have added, "or gone to such expense," if he had not been there. In reply to Major Carrington's gesture, he came forward a little, and inspected the father's gift.

It was a gold necklet of delicate and beautiful workmanship, consisting of four fine chains, caught up at intervals by small rows or clasps of pearls. But perhaps the most striking part of the necklet lay in the clasp by which it was fastened, to which Major Carrington directed their attention.

"Now, look at that!" he said; "that's entirely my own idea. There was a little common,

everyday clasp, such as you see on any woman's necklace, and the man from whom I bought it pointed out to me how very much it would be improved if this fine old antique clasp were inserted in place of the ordinary fastening. It's a curious thing ; some sort of animal upon it—a peacock in green stones. They look like emeralds ; but, of course, they can't be, for I bought it for a mere song. It took my fancy immensely."

Geoffrey stared at the clasp. For a moment he scarcely knew whether he was awake or dreaming. He passed his hand across his eyes for a moment, and then looked again. But it was certainly true ; he could not be deceived.

Before him lay the Indian amulet which had been the crowning glory of Lady Rockingham's necklace, and which Sir James had declared that he was more sorry to lose than the diamonds themselves.

How, then, had it come into Major Carrington's possession ? He glanced at Joan, but her face was perfectly tranquil and unconscious. Probably she had never examined Lady Rockingham's necklace, and had not attached any particular value to the clasp.

But she must have heard, he thought, of the emerald peacock on a background of brilliants, the loss of which had disturbed Sir James so much. And, indeed, her next words proved that she had thought of it.

"Surely," she said, "this is the same pattern as the clasp on Lady Rockingham's necklace? I remember she had a peacock upon hers."

"A peacock is a very common emblem," said Geoffrey hurriedly. "Hers, of course, was almost priceless. Emeralds and diamonds! Did you say, sir"—turning to Major Carrington—"that you got this for a trifle?"

"I gave exactly fifteen shillings for it," said the major, chuckling; "and, upon my word, I should have thought that too much, were it not that the thing rather attracted me. You see, it corresponds very well with the necklace, as there are green stones at intervals between the pearls."

"Very pretty! May I look at it for a minute or two?"

Joan handed it to him, and Geoffrey turned with an air of apology more towards the light. He wanted, he said, to examine the design. When he returned the necklet to her, she noticed

that his face had turned a little pale, and she could not imagine why.

He observed merely that the design was very good, and placed the morocco case once more upon the table; but he was again startled, and this time almost beyond words, for a closer examination had confirmed him in his first impression that the clasp was the genuine Indian amulet which Lady Rockingham had lost.

Geoffrey was a strong believer in the "long arm of coincidence"; but it had seemed to him almost too startling a coincidence that he should see part of Lady Rockingham's necklace in the hands of the very woman whom he had for a time suspected of stealing it.

Major Carrington, after a few more cheerful remarks about the ornament, the weather, and the state of politics, recollected an engagement at his club, and excused himself to his daughter and her guest, saying that they would all meet again at dinner-time. Geoffrey felt that he ought to go, too, but Joan detained him.

"Wait one moment!" she said. "I never told you what I found out about the girl whose wrist was sprained in the train."

Geoffrey waited willingly, but he had time to put one question to Major Carrington before that gentleman departed.

"Will you tell me where you got that necklet, major? I should say that the man who made it was an artist in precious stones."

"He is a bit of a connoisseur, I must admit," said the major; "but you would never think it to look at him. He buys old gold and silver, and articles of much less value, and retails them at considerable profit. A Jew, I fancy, but he doesn't acknowledge his nationality. His name is Cronin, and he has a shop in Pimlico."

He was half-way down-stairs as he gave this piece of information, and Geoffrey came back into the drawing-room to hear Joan say in a tone of surprise:

"Did father say Cronin? Why, that's the name of the girl Nan, and she said that her father had a shop in Pimlico, but she would not give me his address."

"The plot thickens!" thought Geoffrey to himself; but he merely asked what Joan had learned concerning the girl, and listened with

rather a grave face while she recounted what she knew.

Geoffrey heard her with the greatest attention, but her story threw no light upon his perplexities. A new link was added to the chain of his suspicions, but that was all.

The diamonds had been given to the man who met Nan at the station; and Nan was the niece of the dealer in second-hand wares, of whom Major Carrington had bought the clasp.

There was evidence enough to justify him in notifying the police of these facts; but he was still in the dark as to the man's name and identity. The glimpse that he had caught of him at Earl's Court, in company with Nina Townley, had not added to his peace of mind. He began dimly to suspect the existence of a plot; of something more serious than simple theft.

"Why do you look so troubled?" Joan asked him abruptly, when she had told him all she knew of Nan.

"I am troubled!" he said; "and I want you to be my adviser, if you will."

"I am not wise enough to give you any advice," said Joan, smiling.

"I shall want forgiveness, too," he said, rather sadly. "I have been a dolt, an idiot, an incapable fool! That is my first confession. And now, before I go any further, let me tell you one unpleasant fact about the necklet that your father brought to you this afternoon. The clasp is not made of imitation stones, and he has been deceived, either purposely or accidentally, by the dealer. It is the famous Indian clasp which belongs to the Rockinghams. I recognized it almost at once by certain marks which I will show you. I am very sorry to have to tell you this, Joan!"

"Sorry! But I am glad!" cried Joan. "Poor, dear daddy! he will be vexed; but Lady Rockingham will be delighted. She told me that Sir James was more vexed about the loss of the clasp than anything else. I don't think they will mind losing the diamonds if they get the clasp back again."

"Then you would propose to send it back to my aunt at once, telling her how your father found it in a London shop and bought it for fifteen shillings?"

"Why, of course! What else should I do?"

"Anything but that! You have no idea of the net that is closing in about us, Joan. Now, let me tell you all that has happened during the last few days and then you will understand."

She let him hold her hand in his, as he had often done before, when he began his story; but as he proceeded she drew it gently but decidedly away. And when he had finished, she sat silent for a little while.

"You said that I should understand," she said, when the pause had lasted long enough to make him very nervous. "Let me be sure that I have mastered all the facts. You saw a woman wearing my blue cloak meet a man at the castle well, and you thought that it was I. You saw her kiss him, and you thought that I had stolen out at night to meet my lover. Well, I forgave you that, because I believed that men were naturally jealous, and that you were to be pitied rather than blamed. Now you tell me that you saw this woman, whom you believed to be Joan Carrington, give money and a string of diamonds to this man, and you came to the conclusion that the diamonds were stolen from your aunt by me—by the same Joan Carrington. Is that so?"

"Oh, Joan, don't be so hard on me! I was bewildered, deceived. I did not know what to think!"

"Would not a woman have known what to think, even if she had been sure that she saw the man she loved in suspicious circumstances? Would she not have trusted him—at least until she was certain of his guilt? Is my character always to be at the mercy of the people round me, so that if my maid or my enemy should wear my clothes you conclude me guilty of any crime she may commit?"

"Isn't that enough, Joan?"

"No, I don't think it is. I think you showed the greatest possible want of trust in me. You have insulted me by even telling me what you thought, Mr. Brandon! It would have been better to leave me in ignorance."

"Not when your good name is at stake. You must vindicate your innocence. I believe that the person who wore your cloak meant to be taken for you, if perceived; and I believe that person to be——"

"Nina Townley! I think that is clear to the meanest intelligence," said Joan, with a touch of

scorn. "She always hated me—I don't know why. But her conduct hardly excuses your conclusions."

"I can't excuse myself. But I was bound to tell you the truth. There is this man at St. Romuald's hunting and fishing about for details; there is the fact that your cloak was covered with the red dust which abounds only at the ruins where you took pains to assure Lucy that you had not been; there is Major Carrington's possession of the Indian clasp. You must let me help you out of this—this danger to yourself; for indeed, there is a danger of false accusation and unpleasantness. But you and I together may perhaps bring the truth to light."

Joan was silent for a time. Then she said, very coldly:

"For my father's sake I should be glad to have the mystery solved. It would be a great grief to him if any reflection were cast either upon my honor or his own. But I do not intend to owe you any gratitude, Mr. Brandon!"

"You need not. I will work for truth's sake alone. Perhaps, however, you may some day forgive me when you see how earnestly I labor to discover the facts."

"I don't think that at all likely. I do not easily forgive an insult. I should never have imagined that you would think so badly of me, Mr. Brandon; but I will do what I can to vindicate my character, as you so kindly express it; and perhaps you will tell me what you think ought now to be done. I should say that you had better put the whole matter into the hands of the police."

"Not yet," urged Geoffrey, in a subdued voice. "Think how little we really know."

"We know a good deal. You saw the man receive the diamonds."

"We do not know that they were Lady Rockingham's diamonds."

"I think we may safely assume that they were. I don't know much about the law, but I should not be surprised to hear that you had committed a criminal offense by suppressing this piece of information, Mr. Brandon. You then find that this man meets the girl Nan at St. Pancras, and Nan turns out to be the niece of the dealer who sold the stolen clasp to my uncle. The mysterious stranger is also discovered walking with Mrs. Townley, who was staying at Lady Rockingham's

(and probably borrowed my unfortunate cloak) when the diamonds were stolen. It is all circumstantial evidence, no doubt; but I think that it points to the man whose name we do not know, and I should say that you had better set the police upon his track as soon as possible."

"You are right," said Geoffrey, with an air of dejection; "but I was going to suggest that if we could get hold of the girl Nan Cronin, she might tell us the name of the man who met her at the station, which would simplify matters."

"You can do exactly as you please," said Joan, turning her back upon him. "I do not see that it is my business. And, as you are going, Mr. Brandon, may I ask you to take your aunt's Indian clasp away with you? I have no room in my house for stolen goods!"

She swept out of the room without bidding him adieu, and it was in a subdued and chastened spirit that Geoffrey quitted the house. But he left the Indian clasp behind him upon the table in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IX.

A SHOP AT PIMLICO.

It need scarcely be said that Geoffrey did not keep his engagement that night with Major Carrington. He left a note at the club to explain that important business kept him away; and he learned afterwards that the little dinner and the visit to the theater did not take place, as Joan was suddenly attacked by a bad headache, and was quite unequal to the proposed expedition. Geoffrey did not know this at the time, and tormented himself for the whole evening with vain imaginations of the festivity which he was obliged to forego.

He was almost beside himself with anger and regret when he left Major Carrington's house; and although he reproached himself for his own stupidity, he accused Joan of hardness of heart in not seeing how much suffering his stupidity had

cost him. Perhaps a man seldom, if ever, gauges the amount of pain that he gives a woman when he shows that he distrusts her. Geoffrey was truly penitent for his misdoings, but he did not quite understand that they had made Joan suffer even more than he himself had done.

But no matter how severely they hurt each other, of one thing he was certain—that nothing on earth could separate them altogether. Joan might be indignant, he himself might feel some resentment; but they loved each other all the time, and would fight for each other to the very end. Their apparent alienation had no effect on Geoffrey's present plans. He was Joan's champion, and would remain so to the last day of his life. Therefore, it behooved him to set about the discovery of the person who had robbed Lady Rockingham of her diamonds with all possible speed, lest other people should be misled, as he himself had been, by the vision of that woman in the blue cloak at the castle well.

His mind turned towards Nan Cronin and her possible connection with the man who had received the diamonds, and the dealer in curiosities who had sold the Indian clasp to Major Carrington.

He thought that he understood now why Nan had not dared to tell Joan her address. She had perhaps been forbidden to do so—if, at least, it was known that she would come in contact with Joan herself, which, after all, did not sound probable. But her knowledge of two men who seemed to be mixed up with the robbery was suspicious. A shop in Pimlico! A curiosity dealer! Data were somewhat meager, but Geoffrey thought that he would try his fortune. He went to his club and looked up the names of various shopkeepers and their localities. But it did not seem very easy to find the one he wanted.

There was nothing for it but to make an expedition to Pimlico—a locality which he knew very slightly—and try to discover Cronin's place for himself. On the day, therefore, after his disturbing interview with Joan, he devoted an afternoon to the search.

He walked for some time through the chief streets of the district without seeing either the name for which he was looking or any shop answering to the description given by Nan or the major. In an hour's time he became convinced of the futility of his manner of search, and resolved

to try other tactics. He inquired at a post-office, at a milkman's shop, at a chemist's. But nobody seemed to know anything about a man of the name of Cronin.

It occurred to him, after a time, to inquire at a working-jeweler's shop. If Cronin dealt in stones and ornaments of various kinds, he might be known to persons who manufactured and mended such articles.

And here he found himself on the right track. The master of the shop, indeed, shook his head, and knew nothing; but an ingenuous assistant was proud to push himself forward and inform the questioner that Mr. Cronin's establishment was in the next street.

"What, the rag-and-bone shop?" said the master contemptuously. "I did not know that you meant *that* place!"

"But he deals in curiosities, does he not?"

"Of a kind—yes, I believe so. I do not know much about him," said the jeweler, with reserve.

And Geoffrey could not obtain any further information. He had, however, achieved his object, he had got Cronin's address.

The shop was in a back street, where he would not naturally have looked for it, and presented an appearance of squalid neglect and commonness which took Geoffrey by surprise. He had expected to find a more pretentious or, at least, a more prosperous-looking establishment. The house was very old, and the walls were peculiarly grimy; the woodwork of the door and windows seemed rotten, and the crooked doorstep bore a great crack across its surface. Through the dusty, small-paned windows Geoffrey could dimly discern an odd medley of articles—an old clock, a faded satin dress, some dingy china, and a hopelessly hideous Chinese monstrosity which had once been honored as a god. There were dusty books, too, and some unattractive miniatures in black frames. Certainly the shop had not an inviting appearance, and Geoffrey was surprised that Major Carrington should ever have fathomed its murky recesses. But the major had a taste for bric-a-brac, and it was possible that this man Cronin was known to connoisseurs as a dealer in antique treasures, as well as what the jeweler had called "rags and bones."

Geoffrey was still looking in at the window when

an old man appeared at the door, and addressed him with a kind of saturnine politeness.

"If there's anything in the way of curiosities that you'd like to see, you had better step inside, sir. I don't keep much in the window. My business is mostly transacted up-stairs, where I have a show room and an office."

He said the last words rather significantly, and a gleam of light came to Geoffrey's mind. The old man, probably a money-lender, and a young, well-dressed man hovering about the entrance to his shop, was neither an unwelcome nor an unaccustomed sight. This theory explained a good deal, in Geoffrey's opinion, and made it easy for him to adopt a part which would probably seem perfectly natural to Mr. Cronin.

He turned, therefore, and confronted that worthy with an air of indecision, which the old man treated with a sardonic smile.

Nathaniel Cronin—so ran the name above the door—was of undeniably striking appearance. His shoulders were slightly bent; but in his youth he must have been tall and muscular-looking, though probably always lean and gaunt. His hair, which was quite white and rather long,

fell on either side of a stern and ascetic countenance; his skin was absolutely colorless, more like parchment than any other substance; and his eyes, deeply-set beneath shaggy eyebrows, glowed like coals of living fire. His chin was covered by a thin, white beard; but his upper lip was bare, and the mouth, thus left exposed, was hard and cruel in its rigid, straight lines.

There was something of a Jewish air in the cast of his features, but Geoffrey did not feel sure of his nationality. The face was Oriental; the man's surname was Irish; his accent was that of a Londoner, though without any obvious cockney vulgarities.

He waved his long, thin hand towards the interior of his shop with a disparaging smile.

"There is nothing here that a gentleman like you would care for," he said; "but I have some very interesting things up-stairs."

"I should like to see them," said Geoffrey. "Anything in the way of old silver? I take an interest in snuff-boxes."

"I have a couple of very fine snuff-boxes up-stairs, chased silver, supposed to have belonged

to Louis the Fourteenth; old rings and ornaments as well. And coins—curious old coins."

"I like new ones better," said Geoffrey, and Mr. Cronin's thin lips again relaxed into a smile.

"I might oblige you in that way, too," he said. "A good many gentlemen share your tastes, sir, and come to me to supply them. We'll talk about that in my office, if you please."

He turned towards a narrow staircase, which led from the shop to an upper story; but, suddenly pausing, he sent a strident call into the remotest corners of the house.

"Nan! Nan! Come here, and mind the shop while I take this gentleman up-stairs."

And with some interest Geoffrey stood and looked while Nan came forward—the slender, white-faced girl, with the big, black eyes, whom Joan had dragged out senseless from the wreck of the shattered train—to his mind even thinner, whiter, and more scared-looking than she had been on the night of that catastrophe.

He wondered whether she would recognize him; but there was no sign of recognition in her great eyes as she stepped out of the shadow and looked

vacantly at him and then at her uncle, as if waiting for orders.

Mr. Cronin frowned at her, hustled her aside a little roughly, and then indicated to Geoffrey the way that he should take.

There was a steep flight of stairs to ascend, then a passage and a dusty show-room to cross, and then Geoffrey saw before him a door, on which was neatly painted the inscription:

"Mr. Cronin's Office. Private. No admittance except on business."

Mr. Cronin took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. Geoffrey entered, and was asked to seat himself in a plain wooden chair, while the old man opened a bureau and showed a row of pigeon-holes, some piles of neatly-docketed papers, and writing materials.

It was not an imposing office; but Mr. Cronin, as he seated himself at his desk, looked very businesslike indeed.

"If you look at that circular, you'll see the kind of business that I do," he said, in a practical tone.

Geoffrey perused the paper with considerable interest. It set forth that Nathaniel Cronin was

prepared to lend money (on good security) to every one who desired it; that his terms were strictly just, and not at all exclusive; and that he repudiated all the extortionate tricks of the ordinary money-lender. It was really a very specious document, and Geoffrey would have liked to pocket it for future reference, had not Cronin stretched out his hand for it with a somewhat peremptory gesture.

"If you've read it, that's all you need," he said. "I don't let people take my circulars away until I know that they are good customers. Now, sir, how much do you want?"

"A hundred pounds," said Geoffrey promptly.

"A hundred? Small business that. But even that can't be got without proper security. What security do you offer?"

"None at all. But I have something that I can deposit with you in exchange for the money. You take valuables, do you not?"

Mr. Cronin put down his pen, and looked at the young man suspiciously.

"Valuables?" he repeated. "Well—under special circumstances; but I like to know all about 'em. I keep on the safe side of the law.

Nobody need come to me with things that have been dishonestly obtained." He put on an air of the strictest virtue as he spoke.

"Oh, you always make strict inquiry, do you?" said Geoffrey, affecting disappointment. "That doesn't suit everybody, does it? And some things could never be traced—stones, for instance."

"Stones? Oh, that's your lay, is it, sir? Now, *what* stones, might I ask?"

"I haven't them with me; I wanted to see you first, and ask whether you would do business. I don't mean to hawk them all over the town."

"They are worth something, then?" said Cronin, with a gleam of interest in his black eyes.

"Diamonds," said Geoffrey softly.

It occurred to him that he possessed an old diamond ornament which had been bequeathed to him by an aunt—"for his wife on her wedding-day." The stones were valuable, but the setting was ugly and inartistic. Geoffrey had always intended to have the stones rearranged, and it appeared to him now that he might easily use them as a means of acquiring information about Mr. Cronin's methods.

"A ring? a necklace? or what?"

He described the ornament to the best of his ability, and sketched the form of it with a pencil on the back of a half-sheet of paper. Mr. Cronin looked at it carefully, and then examined Geoffrey with a suspicious eye.

"This is a lady's ornament?" he said cautiously.

"It is."

"And does the lady know that it is in your possession, and that you want to raise money upon it?"

"The lady is dead. She left it to me in her will."

"That's very interesting. Perhaps, sir, you'd be good enough to give me your name and that of the lady who is dead? I'm obliged to be very particular, you see, and I should not like any mistakes."

"You are not always as particular, Mr. Cronin," said Geoffrey, who thought that the time had come for him to show a little rising temper.

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

"You don't make inquiries of all your clients, do you? I cannot for the life of me see why you

should want to know the history of every piece of jewelry that comes into your hands, nor what difference it makes to you if you do know."

"If you take that tone, young man," said Cronin, putting down his pen, "I don't think it will be convenient for me to do business with you. I am not used to being approached in this way. I can keep a secret, if necessary. I can help a man out of a difficulty; but I can make this condition—that the persons who come here shall not try to conceal the truth from me."

"But suppose there is nothing to conceal?"

"There is always something to conceal," said the money-lender, with solemnity. "If there isn't, why come to me? If you are a young gentleman of good family and good character, your friends or your banker will advance you a hundred pounds as soon as look at you. If you have heard of me, you will know that I don't take ordinary cases. I make advances occasionally to persons that I can trust—persons in exceptional distress—in a tight place, as they often say to me. I don't see why you came to me at all. I'm not the right man for you. I should like to know who sent you here."

"No one sent me, Mr. Cronin; but I've heard your name from one or two people," said Geoffrey calmly. "Major Carrington, for instance."

Cronin half rose from his chair, and then sat down again.

"Major Carrington? Well, he's not often a customer of mine."

"But he was the other day. He bought a very pretty ornament from you for his daughter."

"H'm! Yes, he did. A necklet that I got at Lady Aldan's sale. An inexpensive little thing, but pretty—yes, very pretty."

"With a remarkable clasp," said Geoffrey.

He had hit the mark at last. Cronin's face turned livid, and then absolutely purple, as if with suppressed rage.

"What—what do you know about the clasp?" he said, in a stifled rage.

"I? What should I know?" said Geoffrey, affecting surprise. "Only I am a judge of stones in a small way, and I wondered whether you often parted with real emeralds and diamonds for the sum of fifteen shillings, or whether you were ignorant of the value of the clasp you sold to him."

"Eh? What? You don't mean to tell me

you think the clasp genuine Indian work?" said Cronin, recovering himself. "Oh, no, my dear sir. Your eye has deceived you completely. It is a poor imitation—bits of green glass and crystal, that is all. It was barely worth the fifteen shillings Major Carrington paid for it, only there was the workmanship and the alteration in the necklet to consider."

"I see," returned Geoffrey composedly. "Well, Mr. Cronin, your information may be useful to me. I am glad to know that it is not the Indian clasp that used to fasten Lady Rockingham's necklace, for I must say that I thought I recognized it. You may hear of the matter further from Major Carrington, or from Sir James Rockingham, because the resemblance of the clasp to the one lately stolen at St. Romuald's is so very extraordinary."

Mr. Cronin's face assumed an expression of absolute blankness.

"I was not aware," he said politely, "that Lady Rockingham had suffered any loss of the kind."

"Yes, she lost a diamond necklace with an Indian clasp under somewhat peculiar circumstances. It is always possible that valuable stones

may change hands rather rapidly? and I therefore came to you, Mr. Cronin, to notify you that it would be as well to be careful about the goods that you receive or offer for sale at present. If by chance any of the stolen goods were to come into your possession, I should be quite willing to enter into a private negotiation with you for their return."

"I assure you, sir, that no stolen articles are likely to come this way," said the money-lender, with an almost furious expression upon his long, pale face.

"Perhaps not. But, of course, you might come across them accidentally. You understand? I'll leave you to think the matter over, and will call again in a day or two. You would find it to your interest to make terms with me, Mr. Cronin. There is my card. You can call or write if you have any proposition to make. I am a barrister, and the nephew of Sir James Rockingham. And now I will wish you good afternoon."

He left Mr. Cronin gazing, with a petrified face, on the card which he had thrown down, and felt his way through the show-room and down the dark stairway to the shop.

CHAPTER X.

MR. JULIAN TOWNLEY.

NAN was sitting on the doorstep, with her shoulder hunched up to her ears, and her hands supporting her chin, as Geoffrey came out. He had to touch her in order that he might pass, and she started up when she saw him, with a queer, reluctant smile on her pale face.

"It's you?" she said, nodding her head rather shyly.

"I thought you did not know me. How are you? None the worse for your railway accident, I hope?"

"Don't speak loud," said Nan. "I don't want Uncle Nat to know as I'd seen you before. He was mad when I told him that I'd nearly lost that bag, and let you help me with it. So I did not want him to know it was you, or he'd say I told you where I lived. And I didn't, did I?"

"Not in the least," said Geoffrey cheerfully. "I won't let him know. But could you come out and talk to me for a minute this evening? I believe you could do me a great service if you would."

Nan's eyes brightened. She looked up, with quite a new expression in her face.

"I'd like that," she said simply. "I don't know as any one was ever so kind to me as you and that lidy you was with. But there's uncle coming. You go away quick, and I'll meet you by the railings of the old church down the road at nine sharp. He always sends me out for the supper-beer."

Geoffrey nodded and walked on, for he heard Mr. Cronin's voice and steps upon the stairs. It was now after six o'clock, and he thought that his best plan was first to find and make a careful note of the old church where he was to meet Nan that night, and then to betake himself to some civilized place and eat his dinner.

At nine o'clock the streets were dark, and rain had begun to fall. It was not heavy rain, but a gentle drizzle, such as damped the spirits as well as the clothes of pedestrians. Geoffrey felt rather

anxious as to whether Nan would keep her appointment, and he paced up and down the narrow pavement outside the railings of the disused graveyard which surrounded the old church of which she had spoken, wondering whether he could talk to her in any other way if she did not come. But, five minutes after the church-bell had sounded the hour, he saw the girl's thin, bedraggled figure running towards him, and he recognized by instinct that her weird little face and lean, uncomely figure concealed a very faithful soul.

She was poorly dressed in a cotton frock, rusty-black jacket, and broken straw-hat. Her boots let in the wet, and her hands were red and chilled; but she waved the jug that she carried triumphantly towards him when she found that he was there.

"Lor, how wet it is! I thought I should never get here. Uncle took it into his head that he didn't want his beer to-night. He seems upset about something, and talked about going out to see Josiah; but I quieted him down, and so he gave me tuppence, and let me come, but I mustn't be long. He may have gone, after all. I don't know."

"Have you no one to send?"

"Nobody but me. There's an old woman that cleans up and cooks a bit; but she goes away in the evening, and so does the errand-boy. I does most of the work of the house. There ain't much to do."

Geoffrey smiled, and took from his pocket a bright, heavy five-shilling-piece, which he put into her hand.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "That's to buy yourself something."

Nan turned the coin over and over, and seemed more puzzled than pleased.

"It's five shillings, ain't it?" she asked, at length. "I've never had so much before—all at once, I mean. But what's it for?"

"I told you that you could help me," said Geoffrey.

"Yes; but I hain't helped you yet," said the girl, thrusting the crown-piece back into his hand. "I don't take what I haven't earned, thanky. When I've done anything for you, you can give me five shillings, if you like."

"I'll double it—and more than double it—if you will tell me what I want to know," said Geoffrey.

She looked up at him for a moment, and shuffled with her feet. An odd touch of embarrassment came into her manner.

"If it's anything about Uncle Nat," Nan said, "I think you'd better leave me be. He ain't particular good to me, but he's my uncle, and he keeps me, and I can't say nothing bad of him, can I?"

"I won't ask you anything about him, Nan," said Geoffrey, touched by this manifestation of fidelity. "It is only about some one that I want to know. And I don't suppose that what you tell me will do him any harm. Don't you know a man whose first name is Julian?"

"No," she said stolidly.

"Think again. Some one called Julian—tall, dark, with a long mustache, pointed at the ends. I think you know him; because, you will remember, he met you at the railway station when you arrived in London after the accident."

"Oh, him!" said Nan. And then she said nothing more.

"Well, isn't his name Julian?" asked Geoffrey, after a rather impatient silence.

"No, it ain't!"

"But I have heard him called Julian."

"Oh, maybe. People has lots of names sometimes. It's convenient, don't you see. No, his name isn't Julian."

"What is it, then?"

Nan shook her head.

"They'd kill me if I told you. I've got my orders. I'm not to tell anybody what I see or what I hear. If I do, Uncle Nat says that he'll flay me alive. Besides, what do you want to know his name for? He's a friend of mine, and you want to do him some harm. It would be a paltry thing for me to go and tell of him."

"Oh, his name is a secret, then?"

"I didn't say so. I don't see what you came for, bothering round to know his name. I wouldn't have met you if I'd known that that was all."

She turned to go, but Geoffrey caught her hand.

"That isn't all, Nan. You say that I was kind to you, that the lady in the train was kind. Don't you wish to help us at all? We are in great difficulty, and I love her very much."

"Does she love you, too?" said Nan, opening her dark eyes at him solemnly.

"I think so. I hope so. But she is separated from me, and I shall never get her back unless I can discover something which at present I don't know. And the first thing to discover is that man's name."

He had spoken from a sudden impulse, not knowing how much she was likely to understand. She was an ignorant, unlettered child, and it was not very likely she should have the slightest comprehension of his love for Joan. But something in the expression of her great dark eyes seemed to show him that she understood him more than he had dared to expect. Perhaps she had been reading penny novelettes, and was imbued with a romantic love of the ideal. At any rate, what he had said interested and solemnized her to a remarkable degree. She evidently went through a struggle with herself before she spoke again.

"I don't know as how I can help you in partic'lar," she said slowly, "though I wouldn't mind doing it when I think of the lidy, and how good she was to me. But there, a promise is a promise, isn't it? And I ain't going to break my word. I don't mind putting you in the way of finding out something for yourself."

"Tell me, Nan!"

"Do you know them tall flats in Kensington—great high flats as seem to shut out all the light? Yes, that's the name. I'd clean forgotten it. If you was to go there, you'd find one part of it called D—Block D they call it—and you'd go upstairs to the very top floor of all. And there you'd come to No. 28, which is just fronting the stairs."

"And is that the home of the man I am looking for?"

"You can go and see," said Nan distantly. "I'm not bound to tell you anything, am I? There's a brass plate on the doorpost, and you'll see a name there that maybe you knows already."

"What name, Nan?"

"You know the name of Townley, don't you, well enough?"

"Mrs. Townley?" said Geoffrey, in surprise.

"Mrs. Townley? No fear! You'd better look for yourself when you get there."

"Can you tell me nothing more?"

Nan shook her head.

"I don't know but what I've told you too

much already. You must find out the rest for yourself."

"Do you know what I am trying to find out?"

"No," said Nan strenuously. "I don't know nothink. I does what I'm told, that's all. I must go back now. Uncle will be raging by this time."

"You can take your five shillings with a good conscience," said Geoffrey, trying to smile, although he was feeling a good deal of disappointment. "And perhaps some day you'll meet me here again?"

"No, I sha'n't! It's no good. You want to find something out that uncle doesn't want you to know, and I don't think it's fair to ask me to help you."

"It is always fair to ask you to do what is right," said Geoffrey.

But Nan looked as though she had neither ears nor eyes for him any longer.

"I won't take your money," she said, almost rudely. "You can go to the flats if you like, and find out what you can."

"And you won't help me, or the lady that was kind to you?"

Nan's answer was to put her head down and run as fast as she possibly could away from him. He called after her, but she did not look back, and her flying figure was soon lost in the darkness of the night. Geoffrey, half angry and half amused, looked after her, and wondered what he was to do next.

"Columbia Mansions," he said to himself, repeating the name of the flats to which Nan had referred him. "It's too late to do any good to-night; and yet, I might as well go and look at the name."

It was sheer restlessness that made him do it. He had no intention of paying a call at that untimely hour; but he wanted to test the truth of Nan's words. It seemed to him that he could not sleep in peace unless he knew certainly whether any one of the name of Townley lived at 28, Block D, Columbia Mansions, Kensington.

He walked until he came to the more frequented streets, then he took a hansom. But misfortune dogged him that night. It seemed to him as though none of his efforts were to be successful. He had not driven far before the horse went down, and the cabman was thrown from his seat into the

road. Geoffrey himself was not hurt; but a feeling of humanity prompted him to look after the prostrate driver, and not leave him until he had been safely deposited at a hospital. More than half an hour was thus occupied, and that half-hour made a considerable difference to Geoffrey's plans.

He was by this time considerably out of his way, and for some time he could not find a cab.

"What nonsense it is!" he said, stopping short in the wet street, and considering within himself whether he had not better go home again. "Why on earth should I go to-night? But I suppose I shall not feel satisfied until I have looked at the name upon the door. Hi, hansom!"

He gave the address, and drove once more in the direction of Columbia Mansions.

He was in the act of paying the cabman when some one passed him on the pavement, and entered the door of the mansions. Geoffrey caught sight of his profile, but that was quite enough. He had seen old Nathaniel Cronin, and he guessed at once that the dealer was going to visit the mysterious occupant of No. 28.

"Surely Nan can't have betrayed me!" he said to himself.

He remembered the girl's faithfulness to her uncle, her reluctance to do anything of which he would disapprove. She had a conscience of her own—of rather an eccentric sort, it must be avowed—and perhaps her conscience had stimulated her to confess that she had given Geoffrey the address of the man—if it was the man whom he desired to find.

"But I don't know. Why should she do it?" he said to himself, as he climbed flight after flight of steep stone steps. "She cannot think that she has done him any harm or me any particular good."

Old Cronin had gone up before him. He went to the very top, just as Geoffrey thought of doing. The stairs were so long and so steep that he had not reached his destination when the younger man entered the building, and Geoffrey waited to hear him stop, ring the bell, in reply to which some one opened and afterwards closed a door. He had gone, then, to the flat of which Nan had spoken, and—who lived there?

Geoffrey looked about for a board containing

the names of the tenants. He found one after some search, for the hall was but dimly lighted, and ran over the names, but he obtained no satisfactory result. "26, Paley; 27, Robinson; 28"—a vacant space, with no name at all.

"He has taken the flat recently," thought Geoffrey, "and they have not yet put his name in the list. I suppose I had better go up. The name will be on the door."

He hesitated before he began the long ascent. If he had not had so much difficulty in finding the place, he would scarcely have gone up-stairs. There seemed some difference between reading the name of a tenant in the hall and going up-stairs to peer at it upon his door. Was there no hint of meanness in such a line of conduct? Geoffrey Brandon all but turned back at the very thought.

But it was ridiculous to turn back when he had come such a distance and taken such trouble to find the place. He must now go on to the end of his quest. Therefore, with light, quick footsteps, he began to mount the stairs, and rather wished himself out of the adventure now that he had begun it.

There were seven flights of steps. No. 28 was at the very top, and the gas-jets on the walls were few and far between. When Geoffrey reached the landing, he was obliged to confess himself a trifle out of breath. He had come up very quickly, and stopped for a moment to recover his wind.

Then, standing, he had time to look about him. The door of No. 28 was partially made of glass, and behind it he could see the dim light of a lamp. He could hear voices, moreover—the voices of two men, who seemed to be conversing rather loudly and angrily, but he could not catch their words. His eye was caught by a white patch on the wall beside the door ; but it took him a minute or two to discover that it was a visiting-card, lightly fastened to the wall. He struck a match, and held it up to the printed name, which there was not light enough at first to see.

"Mr. Julius Townley."

"Julius?" Nina Townley had called the man with the black mustache "Julius." Was it a brother—a cousin ? Was Townley the man's name at all ?

While he looked and meditated, the door was suddenly flung open. The man himself appeared—the man with the hooked nose and—no, not with the waxed mustache. He had shaved off his mustache ; but Geoffrey knew him in spite of this change in his appearance. He was the man who had taken the diamonds from the woman in the blue cloak at the castle well ; the man who had walked with Mrs. Townley in the illuminated gardens at Earl's Court. And Cronin was with him—Cronin, the man who sold the Indian clasp to Major Carrington. Geoffrey felt that he had the clue at last.

"What are you doing at my door?" said the man furiously. "Trying to get in, are you? I'll set the police on you, if you dare to examine my locks in that way!"

"Take care," said Geoffrey, "that the police are not already looking after you."

It was a most imprudent speech, and seemed to excite the hooked-nose man to frenzy. He sprang forward and struck at Geoffrey with all his might. And the young man, unprepared for so violent an assault, tripped and fell backward, downward, crashing against the stone steps,

catching ineffectually at the railings to save himself. Finally he reached the next landing-place, and there lay still.

"Good gracious!" said Cronin, as he came out, and stood at Townley's side. "Is he dead?"

CHAPTER XI.

CONVALESCENCE.

WHEN Geoffrey came back to consciousness he found himself one of a row of patients in the large airy ward of a London hospital. At first he was too weak to talk, or even to think very much, and lay for days without making inquiries, either about himself or his friends. The doctors came and looked at him, and sometimes gave him a good deal of pain. At other times they made remarks in what seemed to him to be an unknown tongue, and to these he nodded and smiled in reply. Then the nurses gave him matter-of-fact attentions, and he came to take a languid interest in their movements, and in the aspect of the other patients in the ward.

The brightness of the place pleased him, too. The flowers on the table, the fire in the grate, and, perhaps, best of all, the large, high, windows,

through which he could see the blue sky and white clouds sailing across it. Then one morning he was aroused to a further sense of consciousness by the arrival of familiar faces. Surely it was his Aunt Charlotte who sat at his side, and cried a little over him, and Sir James who patted him on the shoulder, and bade him "cheer up"? But these friendly visits faded away so soon that he was obliged to ask his nurse afterwards whether they had come or not; and when she told him that they had he was almost too tired to hope that they would come again.

But on another day he had a still more welcome visitor. Was it possible that Joan herself had come down from her pedestal? had emerged, somehow, out of the clouds of distance and resentment, and sat by his side, and took his hand in hers? He knew that he was very pleased to see her, and he murmured some words in which he asked for her forgiveness. But he would have been puzzled to have recalled the precise way in which he had offended her. He only knew that he had done so somehow, and that it was very good of her to come and see him, when she had been so angry with him. Perhaps he expressed

this feeling in some timid, hesitating way, for Joan knelt down and whispered to him—

"Dearest Geoffrey, don't let us think of the past. Only get well, for my sake, and I shall be happy!"

"Yes, I will get well," Geoffrey murmured. "And we can hunt down the lie, the slander, together. What was it? I cannot remember now. I only know that there was something."

"You must not think about it," said Joan coaxingly. "It will only make your poor head ache. See, the nurse is looking at us, and she doesn't like you to be tired."

"When I am better," said Geoffrey, still very feebly, "you will tell me about it, will you not?"

"Every word," said Joan, smiling brightly, although her heart was really filled with anxiety and fear.

"Because, you know, I don't remember exactly what happened. How did I get here? Did I fall somewhere, or did some one push me down?"

"You fell," said Joan, prudently resolving to say as little as possible. "But it doesn't matter how you were hurt, does it? All you have to do is to get well as soon as possible."

"And when I am well," said Geoffrey, detaining her by the feeble clasp of his fingers, "you will marry me, will you not, Joan? I know that was what I wanted most of all. Promise that you will."

"Yes, I promise," said Joan, quite gravely and sedately, without any flush or emotion of any kind. "I will do exactly as you like, only you must get better first, and as quickly as ever you can."

The nurse came up at this point to warn her that the interview had lasted long enough, and Joan took her leave. But the visit had done good, and not harm, as the nurse soon discovered, for his sleep and appetite steadily improved from that day, and he was always better after the occasional visit which she allowed herself to pay.

But she had to be extremely careful in choosing her time for these visits, as a new and strange coldness had sprung up between herself and Lady Rockingham. There had been no explanation between them; but Joan felt the change in her old friend's manner from the moment when they first met in London. Lady Rockingham had frozen her with a glance, and almost turned her

back upon her, and made no answer to the small observations that Joan permitted herself to make.

The change was so striking that it could only be explained by the theory that Lady Rockingham had developed some suspicion of Joan's straightforwardness in the matter of the robbery at St. Romuald's. How this had come about Joan could not say, for it seemed at present as though all inquiry into the matter had ceased. While Geoffrey lay so ill there could be no thought in the Rockinghams' minds for anything but his recovery; and, although Joan connected the accident with which he was supposed to have met with in his endeavors to track the thieves, it was very plain that such an idea had never entered the minds of his relations.

But by and by Geoffrey grew stronger, and began to put things together, and to recall the events of the night of his visit to the flat occupied by Julius Townley. But it took him some little time to place his distorted memories together, and he was well on his way to recovery before he had got a full grasp of all that had happened before he was brought to the hospital.

When he was a little better he was removed

from the general ward to a comfortable private room, where his friends could spend more of their time with him; and Lady Rockingham, who was an affectionate soul, took the greatest possible pleasure in spending a portion of every day at his bedside, and in bringing him stacks of flowers, and all sorts of delicacies which he was not allowed to touch. But she and Joan did not come together and, although it was some time before Geoffrey remarked this fact, he was not slow to notice the shade of cold reserve which crossed his aunt's face whenever her name was mentioned. It needed an effort before he could bring himself to question her about it, for in his weak state he rather shrank from argument or upleasantness. But the difficulty had to be met and faced, so that one day he asked a question which Lady Rockingham found it difficult to answer.

"Why does not Joan come with you sometimes?" Geoffrey said.

"Oh, I don't know!" his aunt answered vaguely. "Why should she come? She is not a relation, and it is not usual for girls to pay visits to men when they are ill."

"Isn't it?" said Geoffrey. "I thought it was

considered a work of charity. At the same time, although we are not related to each other, she is very dear to me. Joan is my promised wife, and I mean to marry her as soon as a marriage is possible."

"Oh, my dear Geoffrey," said Lady Rockingham, in a tone of genuine distress, "are you really sure that you care for her?"

"Of course I am sure! Why, Joan and I have been half engaged for the last year or two, and I hesitated only because I was not sure whether my income would allow me the luxury of a wife. But I have come to the conclusion that it is better to be poor and happy together than to wait year after year for the chance of a larger income."

"If it comes to that fault," said Lady Rockingham, "I am sure that your uncle would make you a sufficient allowance, in case, of course, you were marrying to please him."

"Well," said Geoffrey, looking at her keenly, "and should I not be marrying to please him if I married Joan?"

"Oh, well, my dear boy, it is a difficult matter to discuss! Don't you think you had better ask him yourself? You see, the connection is not

altogether desirable. Major Carrington is rather a dreadful old man, if all reports are true."

"There is no harm in him," urged Geoffrey. "He is a bit fond of play, I acknowledge; but there is nothing absolutely to be said against him, and you couldn't find a more perfect character than Joan's. She is as true and good and unselfish as any woman in the world, and I shall win a treasure when I make her my wife!"

"Oh, well, it's very nice to hear you say so, Geoffrey; but are you really sure that she will make you happy?"

"Why not?" said Geoffrey, in a tone of well-simulated astonishment. "Joan has always been such a favorite of yours."

Lady Rockingham jumped up from her seat, and walked towards the window, then back to the fireplace, where she poked the fire in a perfunctory sort of manner, as if, Geoffrey knew well, to cover some perplexity or agitation that she did not wish him to perceive. But he was determined to get a definite answer of some kind.

"You cannot possibly object to Joan," he went on remorselessly. "Think how you have thrown her in my way, and how often she has stayed at

the Tower when I have been there! In fact, you told me some months ago that nothing would give you greater pleasure than to see me married to her. I don't think Major Carrington's reputation has deteriorated since then, so that cannot affect the question very much."

"Oh, dear Geoffrey," said Lady Rockingham, almost wringing her hands, "how I do wish that you would speak to your Uncle James! You know very well that I always loved Joan, and treated her as if she were my own daughter. But the fact is, that your uncle's mind has been poisoned, so to speak, by the insinuations of that little wretch of a detective that I told you about at St. Romuald's—Tanner is his name—who has been poking and prying about, and imputing evil to the most innocent persons, until I have been quite distracted!"

"Do you mean that he has been speaking against Joan?" said Geoffrey, with a sternness which rather frightened Lady Rockingham.

"Oh, well, dear, you know what these men are! He tried to prove that Joan left the house one evening, and went to the castle ruins between ten and twelve. to meet somebody who was stay-

ing in the neighborhood. Such an unlikely thing for any girl to do! I told James that it was perfectly absurd; but he says that Tanner is a very clever man, and we ought to pay attention to his theories."

"So your mind has been poisoned, as well as my uncle's!" said Geoffrey, in a reproachful tone.

"No, my dear Geoffrey, don't say that! Nothing would induce me to believe that Joan could really act in an unbecoming manner; and as for her being mixed up in any way with the people who stole my diamonds, I think it is perfectly monstrous! Still, it is possible for any girl to be foolish and indiscreet, and if Joan could make midnight assignations with a man whom nobody knows anything about, she is certainly not a fit wife for you, and that is exactly what your uncle says!"

"But I assure you, my dear aunt," said Geoffrey eagerly, "that it was not Joan who met the man in the castle ruins that night. I know all about it, and I am nearly certain that I know who the person was that borrowed Joan's cloak, and wore it for the purpose of disguising herself."

"Really, Geoffrey, so you knew all about it all the time? How clever you are! But why didn't you mention it before you left the Tower?"

Ah, that was the awkward question! Geoffrey felt that his honor and possibly Joan's reputation, were imperiled forever if he said that he had actually seen the diamonds exchange hands. He temporized, therefore.

"I was not quite sure that it was necessary to speak. It was not my business, you know. But you may make your mind perfectly easy about Joan on that score. She walked in the garden only that evening, and never went outside the park palings."

"I am very glad to hear it, indeed I am!" said Lady Rockingham, with every appearance of sincerity. "And you say you are quite sure, Geoffrey? Then, of course, you know who it was?"

"I am not quite sure," Geoffrey admitted, "and until I have absolute proof I should not like to say. But, my dear aunt, you will do me a very great favor if you will tell Uncle James what I say, and if, also, you will show Joan some kindness, for I think she is hurt by your manner to

her, which was certainly very cold on the one occasion when I saw you together."

"I promise you that I will be as nice as possible, Geoffrey, and I am delighted to hear that you can disprove these calumnies. It would be too dreadful if the daughter of an old friend of mine, as Joan is, were guilty of anything that would throw a slur upon her character!"

Geoffrey's brows contracted a little. It was borne in upon him with considerable force, that he could not exactly prove his word, because he had only Joan's assertion, which he most implicitly believed, to rely upon. But would Sir James and Lady Rockingham accept Joan's word as he had done? He knew perfectly well that Joan spoke the truth; but he had not a tittle of evidence on her behalf, if it came to an exact sifting of the facts. Therefore, he was silent a minute or two, and could but devoutly hope that Lady Rockingham's mind was not logical enough to see the weak point in his defense.

His aunt herself led the way to another subject which was uppermost in his mind.

"I have not seen anything of Nina Townley lately," she said. "I wonder whether she is still

in London. You didn't see her, I suppose, before you met with your accident?"

"Only once, quite casually, at the Earl's Court Exhibition, and then I did not speak to her," said Geoffrey. "By the way, have you known her very long?"

"Ages!" said Lady Rockingham indefinitely—"that is to say, four or five years at the very least. I will tell you who she is, if you don't know. She is the daughter of a country clergyman, and married straight out of the schoolroom a man who was not, I believe, a suitable match for her in any way. He came of a good family, and he had some money, I believe; but I have always heard that he was reckless and dissipated, and I think it was a happy release for Nina when he died."

"He died, did he?" said Geoffrey absently.

"My dear Geoffrey, what are you thinking of? Of course, Nina Townley is a widow. I sometimes wonder why she dosn't marry again, for she is not too well off, although she makes a very good appearance. I think she is often a little anxious about money matters, and that was why I did not put any obstacle in her way when she

wanted to come to London to see about her shares."

"Shares?" with a touch of amusement in his voice; but the amusement was rather grim.

"Shares—in a company," said his aunt, rather doubtfully. "I don't know very much about money matters; but she always understands them very well, or seems to——"

"Her husband left her money, then?" said Geoffrey, with interest.

"Oh, I suppose so. Really, I never inquired into the source of her income. How inquisitive you are, Geoffrey! Now, if you were thinking of marrying her——"

"Heaven forbid!" said Geoffrey piously.

"Well, then, you would at least have some reason for your questions. But I don't know exactly what you are driving at."

"Idle curiosity, that is all," said her nephew, not quite truthfully. "Did you ever see the defunct Mr. Townley?"

"No, my dear, I never did. He must have died some time before she was introduced to me. She was in mourning for him, I remember, and very pretty she looked. It was at Lady Lang-

ham's. And she told me, I remember, that Lady Langham was a cousin of hers; so, of course, I knew that her antecedents were unimpeachable, for Lady Langham is so very particular. She told me that she was very fond of Nina, who had been so unfortunate in her marriage; and then I think she was going to tell me something more; but we were interrupted, and I never had the opportunity of renewing the conversation."

"I suppose," said Geoffrey slowly, "that she asked you to be kind to Mrs. Townley—invite her, and all that sort of thing?"

"Well, yes, she did," said Lady Rockingham, with an air of surprise. "And I always did my best for the poor thing, because Lady Langham is an influential sort of woman, and one doesn't like to offend her. I think I have invited Nina to all my big parties since that time, and to a good many little ones as well. Indeed, I have grown quite fond of her! Don't you like her, Geoffrey?"

"I think she is very pretty," said Geoffrey; "and no doubt, as you say, she has been very unfortunate. Is she still friendly with Lady Langham?"

"My dear boy, don't you know that Lady Langham died six months ago? I dare say Nina inherited something from her; but I never liked to ask particulars. If she marries again, I hope she will get a better husband than she did at first."

"You are sure," said her nephew, with what seemed to her extraordinary pertinacity, "that her husband is dead?"

"What a question, Geoffrey! Why, she wore widow's weeds," said Lady Rockingham, as if no answer could be more conclusive. And Geoffrey knew that it was no use to pursue the subject.

CHAPTER XII.

ANNALS OF THE PAST.

THE way in which Geoffrey came by his accident had, of course, been the subject of inquiry, but he himself was reticent about it, preferring to think that the blow which had been aimed at him was not meant to endanger his life. The story which Townley and Cronin had told to the tenants who came rushing out to discover the cause of the commotion on the stairs, was that this stranger, whom neither of them professed to know, had been prying about the doors, and apparently endeavoring to open them; that Townley had spoken sharply, and that the young man, stepping backward in alarm, had missed his footing and fallen. The story sounded plausible enough until the tenants came to know that the young man was the nephew and heir of Sir

James Rockingham, which disposed of the theory that he was a burglar; but by that time Mr. Townley had disappeared from Columbia Mansions, and his flat was once more "to let." But Geoffrey did not find out this fact for some little time.

He was dangerously ill for some days, seriously ill for weeks, and very weak afterwards during the time of convalescence. It was Christmas-time before he left the hospital, and the removal to his uncle's comfortable town house—for it was not thought advisable that the invalid should be removed to Scotland—and the mild festivities of the season occupied his time and attention, almost to the exclusion of other things. He took but a languid interest in the search for the diamonds, which, as Sir James explained to him, had now been put into the hands of the police.

"And there it will remain," Geoffrey answered lazily. "I don't think they'll find out anything."

He did not like to ask whether Joan had mentioned the Indian clasp, or restored it to Lady Rockingham; but he supposed that she had not done so, or he would have heard of it. His op-

portunities of speaking to her in private were minimized now that he was in his uncle's house, for she could not come without an invitation from Lady Rockingham, and Lady Rockingham showed an extraordinary unwillingness to invite her. Geoffrey chafed under the consciousness that his uncle and aunt suspected Joan of "conduct unbecoming a gentlewoman," as Sir James once phrased it; but in his present state of feebleness he could do nothing. He was genuinely pleased, therefore, when Major Carrington one day called upon him, for it seemed to him there was now a hope of getting to know a little more about Joan's wishes and the general state of affairs.

"My dear Brandon," said the major impressively, "I am indeed happy to see you so far recovered. And there is a little matter that I wish to speak to you about. In fact, I have been waiting in great anxiety until I could approach you on the subject."

"About Joan?" said Geoffrey, with a quick flush showing itself on his pale cheek. "Has she told you? And will you give her to me, Major Carrington?"

"Told me? Told me what?" asked the major.

"I know nothing about giving her to any one. That isn't the question at present."

"But it's my question!" cried the young man.

"Wait a little, my dear boy. I have a business question or two to ask you first. We'll speak of personal matters afterwards. Now, tell me, is it true that you recognized the clasp of that necklet as one that was stolen from your aunt?"

"I am sorry to say I did," said Geoffrey.

"So Joan has told me. And you are certain of it?"

"Perfectly certain."

The major moved uneasily on his chair.

"Then, of course, it ought to be returned to Lady Rockingham."

"Well, in strict justice," said Geoffrey regretfully, "I'm afraid it ought."

Major Carrington was silent for a moment or two. His face grew very red, and his white eyebrows almost met above his angry blue eyes. Geoffrey could not imagine what was the matter, and attempted to soothe his apparent wrath—not very happily.

"I'm very sorry, sir, and, of course, it seems

to put you in an awkward position ; but, you see, I couldn't help it, and I was bound to mention it. Then my accident prevented me from explaining the matter to you at the time ; but if you like to let me have the clasp, I can give it to my aunt without precisely informing her how I came into possession of it, and thus there need be no—no embarrassment of any kind——"

"Embarrassment, sir? What embarrassment should there be?" said the major angrily. "It was sheer ignorance, of course, on my part. I should have come about the matter before had you been well enough to be consulted. Your accident has been most unfortunate."

"For me, certainly. But in what way to you?" said Geoffrey, who began to suspect some new disaster.

"It's a very awkward thing to explain," said the major, gradually growing more and more purple. "Naturally my daughter came to me when you had left her—on her birthday, you will remember—and told me the story. I was very much annoyed and disturbed ; but I said to her, 'Get the clasp, and send it to Lady Rockingham immediately. Write a note, and tell her how the

thing came into your possession. She will understand.'"

"Yes," said Geoffrey. "Of course she would understand. Well, sir, what happened? My aunt has never told me that she received the clasp."

"Because she never did receive it," said the old warrior, with a burst of what seemed to be fury. "It was never sent."

Geoffrey looked his inquiry.

"It was never sent, sir, because it was no longer in our possession. It is lost."

"Lost!" said Geoffrey, struggling into an erect position, for he had been resting on a long, low lounge when Major Carrington came in.

"Yes, sir, lost!" shouted the major. "When Joan came to me with the story, I said: 'Don't lose a moment. Get the necklet at once, and I'll cut off the clasp. Where is it?' And she told me that she had left it, very carelessly, on a table in the drawing-room."

Geoffrey nodded. He remembered that it had lain there when Joan left the room.

"When she went back to look for it, the case was there, but the necklet was gone. And up to

this moment we have not been able to trace it."

"What did you do about it?"

"I called on the police at once. I left no stone unturned. I offered a reward. I advertised in the papers. I suspected the servants, and made every one of them turn out their boxes, for which they all gave notice, and left us without a maid in the house. But we did not find the necklet."

"An evil fate seems to pursue that clasp," said Geoffrey, almost impatiently. He reflected for a moment or two, then looked up, and asked whether Major Carrington could give the precise time at which the loss was discovered.

"I can, sir," said the major promptly. "It was half-past five when Joan left the necklet in the drawing-room. It was ten o'clock at night when we discovered that it was lost."

"Some one must have got into the room."

"Nobody could get in from the street, as far as we can see. The house stands in a well-lighted thoroughfare, and the drawing-room is up-stairs, on the first floor."

"Did no stranger enter the drawing-room?"

"Certainly no stranger!" said Major Carrington, with dignity. "One lady called, and was shown into the room, the servant thinking that my daughter was still there. But, of course, a friend of my daughter's is above suspicion!"

"Who was the lady?" Geoffrey asked sharply.

"The lady? Oh, one well known to yourself—well known to Lady Rockingham. A Mrs. Townley."

Geoffrey uttered a sudden exclamation, and rose to his feet.

"I might have known it," he said to himself, rather than to the major. "I might have suspected it. Another link in the chain."

"I do not quite catch what you are saying," said the major, in a tone of offense. "Of course, a friend of Lady Rockingham's is quite above suspicion! She was not in the room two minutes. She came to see Joan, having stayed at Lady Rockingham's house when my daughter was there."

"Oh, yes; I quite understand. Above suspicion—yes," said Geoffrey mechanically. He had turned so pale that even Major Carrington noticed his change of color, and was alarmed,

"I'm afraid I have tired you," he said coldly. "But I heard that you were better, and I thought I ought to come as soon as possible and lay the matter before you. I should, perhaps, have come before; but Joan seemed so nervous and unstrung about the whole affair that I thought I would wait, not knowing that your illness would be such a long affair."

"Pray don't apologize, major," said Geoffrey, affecting a carelessness of tone which he was far from feeling. "There seems a mystery about this Indian clasp—not to speak of the diamonds that my aunt lost at the same time. You won't object to my telling Sir James of this robbery, will you? I think we must put the matter into his hands."

"Of course—of course! I will go to Sir James at once, if you like."

"No, don't trouble. I'll think it over first, if you don't mind. My uncle put the matter into my hands, you see; and, of course, I shall be anxious to arrange it with the least possible trouble to you and your daughter. You will remember what I said just now, won't you, sir? I want to make Joan my wife as soon as I am well

and strong, if you will kindly give your consent."

The major stood up stiffly.

"Joan will choose for herself," he said. "I have no hope of being allowed to influence her. And—er—I think that until this matter is cleared up——"

"Nonsense!" said Geoffrey. "You don't mean to keep me waiting until that unfortunate clasp is found? Excuse me, sir, but I shall not stand any such delay."

Major Carrington spread out his hands.

"I have nothing to say," he answered. "I shall leave Joan to make her own decision. She hinted that, for some reason or other, she was likely to be blamed. If that were the case, I should certainly advise her to wait until the diamonds and the clasp were found."

"If any one blames her, that person will have me to deal with, and will not have a particularly pleasant time," said Geoffrey viciously. But he could not rouse the major to any geniality of tone. And when he was left alone, he fumed and fretted until he brought on a headache, which reduced him to helplessness for the rest of the evening.

But with the morning light, his energy and his resourcefulness came back. An idea occurred to him which he thought was well worth consideration; and after some argument with Lady Rockingham, he induced her to let him go out "on business," without a companion. She ordered the carriage for his use, but he dismissed it in one of the squares, and walked on until he came to a cab-stand, where he took a hansom, and ordered the driver to take him to Scotland Yard.

The inspector for whom he inquired received him smilingly, for Mr. Brandon was not unknown to the police force, and had gained their respect on various occasions.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Brandon?" said Inspector Richards, with his reassuring smile.

"It's just the question of a likeness," said Geoffrey, bringing a small note-book out of his pocket. "I know you have a genius for faces, and I have a habit of making sketches of people whose appearance strikes me——"

"Your sketches are first-rate," said the inspector warmly. "I only knew one man who could do better caricatures, and he's dead."

"But this is not a caricature—at least, I hope

not," said Geoffrey, laughing. "This is a genuine likeness—as good as I could make it. Will you look at that, and tell me whether you know it?"

He submitted a page to the inspector, who waxed thoughtful immediately, screwed up his eyes, and examined the little sketch with a frown of deep attention. Presently he stretched out his hand to a shelf, and took down a large book which looked like a photograph-album. After turning over several leaves, he came across a likeness which he compared with the sketch, laying one against the other, and considering it attentively.

"Look at this," he said to Geoffrey, when he had spent several minutes in this way.

Geoffrey looked over his shoulder.

"All right," he said. "That's the same man."

"Without a mustache."

"Yes, without a mustache. I've seen him with and without one. The face is very easily recognizable.

"Very," said the inspector, with emphasis. "I know him well enough. He served his time for forgery, and he's out now on a ticket-of-leave. We shall have him again before long, I believe.

He has been seen under suspicious circumstances of late."

"And what is his name?"

"Well, he has his aliases," said Richards, with a curious smile. "You must know he posed as a gentleman at one time, married a well-connected woman, and made his way in society. When the forgery was proved, however, she dropped him like a hot coal, and gave out, I believe, that he was dead."

"And now—since he is at large again?"

"I am not sure. He has to report himself from time to time; but, of course, we don't shadow him. I have an idea that he is making up to his wife again; but she'll be very foolish if she has anything to do with him. Some people said that she was as much to blame as he—helped him, in fact—but I don't know. It seems unlikely. One can never tell."

"You know her name?"

"Well, yes, sir, I know her name; but unless it's necessary I don't see the good of telling it. If she wants to cut her acquaintance with a scoundrel, I don't see, for my part, why she shouldn't be allowed to do so."

"You have no objection to telling me his name, have you, Inspector?"

"Not at all. He was convicted under the name of Townley, and goes under that name still."

"Then—Nina Townley—you don't mean to say that she is his wife? Excuse me. I must ask you to tell me this. It's important. Mrs. Townley—she stays at my aunt's house sometimes, and is generally supposed to be a widow—a relation of the late Lady Langham, from whom she inherited some money."

"The same," said the police-officer, nodding slightly. "You've got the facts straight enough. She's not wanting to marry again, I hope; for if she is there'd be trouble. Townley was fond of her in his way, and won't stand any nonsense."

"No, I don't think she wants to marry again; but I believe she is helping her husband in some of his schemes."

"That's quite possible."

"And you say that his name is not Townley? Believe me, I have a reason for asking."

"Oh, no; his name's not Townley," said the inspector quietly enough. "He's the son of a curiosity-dealer at Pimlico, and his real name is Josiah Cronin."

CHAPTER XIII.

GEOFFREY'S APPEAL.

Now that Geoffrey was able to go out by himself, he was not long in making his way to Joan, and pouring into her ear a full account of his discoveries. To his surprise, he found her not only depressed—which he had expected—but a little cold.

"Why, Joan," he said at last, "you are not half so nice to me now as you were when I was ill."

"You needed comforting then," she said, with a smile; "but you don't need it now."

"But I need loving just as much as ever," he said, and threw himself down on a cushion at her feet, so that he could look up into her face. She touched his hair caressingly with one hand, but there was a new look of sorrowful resolution in her eyes.

"I love you," she said, "and I like to tell you so. I like to hear you say that you love me, too; but we must make up our mind, Geoffrey, that these acknowledgments must have an end."

"An end, my darling? With our lives; but not before."

"Long before," she said implacably. "At once, or almost at once; and until the cloud that hangs over me is cleared away."

"There is no cloud."

"There is a cloud of suspicion, of doubt in my truth and honesty. I can read it in your aunt's face every time I see her. She thinks that I had something to do with the disappearance of the diamonds. How she came to that conclusion I can't guess, unless the cloak had something to do with it."

"That's it, most likely," said Geoffrey, with decision. "My uncle has got hold of a little rat of a man called Tanner, who likes to see how clever he is, and to propound theories that nobody else dreams of. He has cross-examined the servants, and Lucy had something to say about the cloak. But nothing has come of it."

"Just this much," said Joan—"that they think me unworthy to be your wife."

"My dearest, you are growing morbid. They have only to look at your face, and to see what you are—my pearl of truth and sweetness."

"Don't try to deceive me, Geoffrey dear. I am sure that Lady Rockingham does not want you to marry me. Yes, you need not deny the truth, for I can read it in your face. And when she knows that you saw the clasp in my possession, and that it afterwards mysteriously disappeared, she will say that I have kept it, and that I was the thief!"

"I think we know too well who is the thief for her to be able to say that. We must have done with concealments and half-truths now, Joan. The time has come for us to place the whole matter in the hands of the police. I believe we have a strong enough case to justify the immediate arrest of this man Townley, or Cronin, or whatever his true name may be."

"If he is arrested," said Joan under her breath, "will not Mrs. Townley fall under suspicion, too?"

"Very probably. The discovery that she is his

wife simplifies the matter very much. It must have been she who met him at the castle well, and put the diamonds and the money into his hands. I wonder I did not see that long before. Nina Townley was the thief in the first instance. Of that I feel certain."

"It is terrible to think of a woman you have known and been rather friendly with as a thief."

"You were never very friendly with her, my dear. Your true instincts came into play, and prevented you from thoroughly trusting her. I am afraid it will be a great shock to my aunt, who liked and trusted her."

"Do you think the money that you saw was stolen also?"

"Yes, that is equally certain. The gold and notes were in an escritoire which stands in my aunt's dressing-room. Mrs. Townley must have walked in and helped herself."

"Can't we permit the story from being made public, Geoffrey? Poor woman! Perhaps she did it to save her husband from want. And she is a person who thinks a great deal of the world's opinion. It will be agony to her to suffer open shame."

"She deserves it, my dear. Would she not have put the shame on your shoulders if she could? Did she not try her level best to make my aunt suspect you? Oh, I see her little game now, and I shall rejoice in knowing that she is to be punished for it."

"Geoffrey, that is vindictive."

"I cannot help it," he answered, kissing first one of her hands and then the other. "I do not profess any pity for her. She is simply a criminal in my eyes; and a dangerous one, too. I hope she will be shut up, out of harm's way, for a good number of years."

"Oh, don't, Geoffrey—don't say these things. Be sorry for her, even if she has to be exposed and punished. Pity her all the more, because she does not know that she is doing wrong."

"My sweet, it is like you to pity her, and I love you for doing it. But I cannot be quite unmindful of the fact that she tried to transfer the blame to your shoulders. I believe she would have been delighted if my uncle had accused you of the crime. And think what we suffered! Think how nearly she separated us for ever! I will try not to be too hard on her, and even to

spare her as much as possible; but, upon my word, Joan, I can't go so far as to feel particularly sorry for her."

Joan sighed and looked down. Her face was grave and gentle, but she pleaded no more. Perhaps she knew that Geoffrey was often better than his word.

"You consent, do you not, dear, to my now telling my uncle the whole story, as far as I know it?"

"Oh, yes, as far as I am concerned. But that brings me back to what I was going to say. Until Sir James and Lady Rockingham are fully convinced that I have had nothing to do with the loss of their money and jewels, I would rather not consider that there is any bond between us, Geoffrey."

"But there is a bond which you cannot break."

"A bond of love! Ah, yes; but we must be silent about it. You are Sir James's heir. You are like a son to him, and I will not marry any man whose family will not love and trust me."

"Aunt Charlotte was always fond of you, Joan."

"Fond? Well, it is rather a weak word, is it

not? I want more than fondness. I want complete confidence, and a genuine, hearty love!"

"Joan, you have twice sent me away in anger. Do you send me away a third time?"

"Yes, for this is not in anger. I send you away now because I love you so dearly that I will not allow myself to do you an injury. It would be an injury if I married you while your people think that I am a thief."

"They don't! They don't! Joan, be reasonable!"

"I am reasonable enough to see what is the right thing to do. Now, Geoffrey, you must go and tell them everything, and ask them to forgive us for having kept back so many details for such a long time. It was your illness that complicated everything. My father objected to approaching Sir James Rockingham on the subject until you were well enough to corroborate what he said."

"It's a muddle from beginning to end."

"We must try to get to know the exact truth, and then there will be no muddle."

"And then, when the whole thing is cleared

up, you will keep your word? You will marry me, darling?"

"Yes, dear, I will, when it is all clear and plain. But I sometimes think that this man Townley and his wife, and Cronin, who seems to be in the plot, are all too clever for us, and that we shall never find out the truth."

"We shall—indeed we shall. Oh, if I could get hold of that fellow, I would force him to speak!"

"He is probably out of the country by this time. A man does not wait to be arrested. I daresay he has disposed of the stones in Amsterdam, and does not mean to come back to England; and Mrs. Townley will join him some day, with the Indian clasp."

"She, at least, has not left England. I saw her in the street to-day. She was driving, and she bowed to me with a smile—such a curious smile, Joan! It was defiant and disdainful—the smile of a conqueror."

"She has not conquered us yet," said Joan. And the color stole into her cheeks.

"And, please God, she shall not do so!" remarked Geoffrey, rising to his feet. "I'll unmask

her. I will get to know the history of those diamonds, if I have to go to the ends of the earth! I am confident that we shall succeed—in time."

"Ah, in time!" said Joan. And there was a wealth of significance in the sadness of her tone.

"You don't mean," said Geoffrey, rather anxiously, "that you are going to forbid me the house altogether? That would be foolish, because I must come and consult you from time to time. We must continue to be friends, Joan, if we are nothing else."

"It would be very much better if you did not come," she said, trying to avert her eyes from his eager, ardent face.

"Indeed it wouldn't. It would give rise to reports that I had quarreled with you. And we don't mean to quarrel again, do we, Joan? We love each other, and trust each other too much for that. We won't call ourselves 'engaged,' if you like; but I shall come every day to tell you how 'the case' is going on."

"It is a very bad plan," she answered, shaking her pretty brown head; but Geoffrey only laughed

and kissed her, and said that she was his only joy in life.

And yet, although he laughed and jested, she knew, in some indefinable way, that he was worried and anxious, and that the position was a difficult one, both for her and for himself. If only there was some way out of "the muddle," as he had called it, without the publicity of a police-court! She was not afraid for herself, but she was thoroughly distressed on account of Nina Townley, whom she had known; and of Lady Rockingham, who would be hurt and shocked at the discovery of so much treachery on the part of one who had pretended to be an intimate friend. Was there anything that she—Joan—could do to make things easier for any one concerned? She sat and thought for a long time without coming to a conclusion. The only mode of action that occurred to her seemed lamentably futile. She could not hope that it would produce any good effect; but she could try.

Meanwhile, Geoffrey had gone home, resolved to lay all the facts before Sir James, and let him deal with them as he liked. He himself was likely, he knew, to come in for some severe criti-

cism ; but he did not think of this very much. He was absorbed rather in a consideration of the best way in which to place the facts as they respected Joan.

Sir James was out when Geoffrey inquired for him, and his aunt was out also. He loitered restlessly from one room to another, feeling too unsettled for any steady occupation ; but on looking into the back drawing-room, which was curtained off from the larger one in front, he was amazed to find it tenanted by a tall, slight woman, whose back was turned to Geoffrey as he entered, and who seemed to be reading a letter which she had lifted from the table where Lady Rockingham conducted her correspondence.

Geoffrey stood still for a moment or two, his whole being swayed by a feeling of anger and abhorrence, which was new in his experience—new, at any rate, with regard to any woman. At last he advanced towards her ; and she, on hearing his step, turned quickly, half concealing the letter in her hand.

"Oh, how you startled me, Mr. Brandon !" she said, with a good deal of sangfroid, considering the position in which he had surprised her.

"I had really no time to read my letter before I came out, so I took the opportunity of reading it here while I waited for Lady Rockingham."

She began to thrust it into her pocket, but Geoffrey held out his hand.

"I can't shake hands for the moment," she said, with a light little laugh. "Wait till I find my pocket. Why do dressmakers always stow them away at the back?"

"Excuse me. I was not about to shake hands with you," said Geoffrey, in a voice which vibrated with wrath. "I held out my hand for the letter which you have this moment taken from my aunt's table. You need not trouble to find your pocket. You can hand the letter to me."

"What do you mean, Mr. Brandon?" said Nina Townley, with changing color and flashing eyes. "If you think you can insult me with impunity, you are mistaken. I have no letter of your aunt's in my possession."

"Show me the one you are trying to get into your pocket, or I will take it from you!" said Geoffrey doggedly. "It is no use to deny the plain truth, Mrs. Townley. I saw the crest on the page as I came in, and I recognized it as one

which my aunt showed me this morning. It is from the Duchess of Wavertree; and if I am mistaken, I will apologize."

He still held out his hand; and Nina, still turning white and red by turns, tried to laugh him out of his seriousness.

"Well, really, since you will have it, I, too, saw the crest, and picked up the letter; but I haven't read a word of it. It was your coming in so suddenly that made me give way to a cowardly impulse, and try to hide it away."

"Thank you," Geoffrey said, as he received the crumpled paper from her hands. He opened it out, glanced at the flaring red crest, then bowed satirically, and placed the letter once more on the table. Nina watched him with frightened eyes. There was something in his manner which she could not understand.

"It might be as well," he said, standing straight and tall before her, and looking straight into her turquoise-colored eyes, "if you were also to restore some other portions of Lady Rockingham's property."

"I don't know what you mean," Nina said passionately. "You talk like a madman!"

"I think you know very well what I mean. You know, for instance, that I consider it dangerous to leave you alone in a room which contains valuable property. I am about to warn my aunt, as I have also warned Miss Carrington, that you are not the sort of person to be admitted in the absence of your hostess. I hope I am not too brutal; but I wish you thoroughly to understand what I mean."

"You are insolent!" said Nina, panting a little, and turning very pale.

"I should be sorry to be insolent. But matters have come to such a pass that I, for one, do not intend to keep silence any longer. I do not know whether you will ever come here again; but if you come, would it not be as well to tell the man to announce you by your right name? That of Townley is a good deal discredited."

"Townley is my name!" she said fiercely.

"No. Pardon me—Cronin. You are daughter-in-law to the old man who lends money under pretext of keeping a curiosity-shop in Pimlico. Your husband, who preferred the name of Townley to Cronin, has just come out of prison, and you are anxious to get him away from England

with a modest competency sooner than let it be known that you are not a widow. I think I have stated the case fairly enough, have I not?"

Nina sat down, hid her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

"Oh, Mr. Brandon, how can you be so cruel!" she sobbed. "How did you learn my terrible—terrible story? Can you not sympathize with me in wanting him to leave the country? And will you not keep my secret?"

"It is quite natural that you should wish him to go; but I surely need not point out, Mrs. Cronin, that one must be careful as to the means by which one procures money sometimes? You may involve yourself and him in considerable difficulties if you do not look about you and try to make yourself safe."

She raised her tear-stained face from her hands, and looked at him furtively. She began to see that he knew a good deal more than he chose to say.

"How could I make myself safe?" she asked slowly.

"There is such a thing as turning Queen's evidence," said Geoffrey. "You could throw that

rascal over, and abjure his ways. You could even produce the property that you handed over to him at the castle well, when you went to meet your husband——"

"You lie! I never went to meet him! It was your precious Joan!"

"No, it was not Joan; and you know that as well as I do. To throw blame on an innocent woman is not the way to get out of your difficulties, Mrs. Cronin."

"What do you want?" she asked, after a moment's pause. Her lips were white as death. She looked as though she were about to faint, and even Geoffrey's heart was slightly stirred to pity. But he steeled himself against her, and stated his requirements. It must be confessed that they were large, but Nina listened to them without a word of remonstrance. Perhaps his terms were better than any for which she had ever dared to hope.

CHAPTER XIV.

A COUNTER-PLOT.

"WHAT I want you to do," said Geoffrey decidedly, "is, first and foremost, to restore the diamonds. I suppose it may be said that I am compounding a felony when I make this proposition, but I can't help it. I propose that you keep the money which you took from my aunt's escritoire, and let us have the stones, with the Indian clasp. I am perfectly certain that my uncle and aunt will gladly abandon any thought of prosecution if they can get back what they value so much more than money—or revenge."

"You have no way of proving that I really touched these things," said Mrs. Townley sharply.

"I think we have, at any rate, sufficient evidence to destroy your character, even if we did not get a conviction. But I think, personally, that you would be found guilty."

Perhaps the implied doubt of positive proof emboldened her, for she said, almost flippantly:

"It is not so easy, perhaps, as you think to prove an innocent woman's guilt, Mr. Brandon."

"Thank God, no!" said Geoffrey, in a deep voice of intense earnestness. "For in that case, your efforts against Miss Carrington might have been more successful than they are."

Nina sat silent for a minute or two, then tried to resume her usual manner.

"Is that all? I might as well be going, then. Lady Rockingham does not seem to have come in."

"You will not go, I think, until you have given me your answer," said Geoffrey quietly. "Will you restore the diamonds?"

"Good gracious, Mr. Brandon, what nonsense you talk! How can I restore what I have not got?"

"Will you put us on the track of the person or persons who have got them? Will you give me a full and complete account of the way in which you became possessed of them?"

"And if I say I will not—or, at least, that I would not if I could?"

"Then I shall put the whole matter in the hands of the police. And I shall also let Lady

Rockingham and certain other people know that you have deceived them, by passing yourself off as a widow, and that you are the wife of the ex-convict——"

"Please don't go on!" said Nina haughtily. "I understand exactly what you mean. You threaten me with social ruin if I do not promise to perform what you desire, whether possible or impossible. A very reasonable way of treating me."

"I do not ask impossibilities," said Geoffrey. "A full confession would smooth your path very much. You could help in recovering the diamonds by giving us some information as to what has become of them."

"Possibly I could, if I knew myself," said Nina scornfully. "I know nothing about your diamonds, or your money, or your Indian clasp! If you think it a brave thing to threaten a defenseless woman because she will not lend herself to your schemes, I can only say that you are different from the ordinary English gentleman. I have nothing more to say."

"You refuse my terms? Mind, I offer safety for yourself and your husband—even for your hus-

band's father, who sold the clasp to Major Carrington, and probably has the diamonds in his possession."

"I am sorry that I know nothing about your diamonds, Mr. Brandon. I am sure I wish I did, if I could do any kindness to dear Lady Rockingham in connection with them. But your remarks on the subject are utterly ludicrous, as well as insulting. Have the goodness to let me pass."

"You absolutely refuse to buy your own safety?"

"I am in no danger."

Geoffrey bowed, and drew back.

"I have given you your chance," he said, "because Joan Carrington urged me to pity you; but as you refuse to be helped, I shall let justice have its way."

Mrs. Townley broke into a tone of angry speech.

"Joan Carrington wanted you to pity me? She shall be pitiable enough herself before I have done with her! You will be sorry yet that you insulted me. I will make her suffer—and you through her!"

"It is useless to recriminate," said Geoffrey,

with a shrug of his shoulders. "I can only say that I shall protect Joan to the best of my ability, and shall not spare any one who injures her."

But she swept by him as though she had not heard. And he felt a little humiliated in his own eyes to think that he had failed in the attempt to frighten her into a confession when he had not the means of compelling it.

Meanwhile, Joan also was devising a plan of action which had just as little likelihood of success as Geoffrey's. Only it happens sometimes that Fortune puts out a hand and helps the most improbable things to come to pass. Fortune sends us unexpected allies. Fortune inclines the hearts of our friends towards us, and melts the courage of our enemies. There are some people who seem always to have Fortune on their right hand, and others who secure her concurrence now and then. And, again, there are unlucky folk who never catch a glimpse of her.

Geoffrey and Joan belonged to the second category, as a rule; but sometimes Joan seemed to have a claim to the first. As a girl at school she had been said to be conspicuously fortunate; and the sequence of disagreeables which had lately

occurred was a very unusual piece of experience. It remained to be seen whether Fortune was on her side or not in the venture she was about to make.

Major Carrington was away for a few days, and Joan could come and go as she pleased. She arrayed herself one cold, frosty morning in one of her favorite winter gowns—she had not very many, but those that she had were well-made and becoming—a dark-green cloth, trimmed with soft brown fur, which brought out into vivid relief the clear tints of her face. The green felt hat, with cock's feathers; the warm gloves of reindeer-skin; the neat, workmanlike boots, all denoted the fact that Joan was going to walk fast and far, and that she did not mind what sort of weather overtook her.

Had she been a little richer, she would have taken a cab; but as she had not many shillings in her purse, and thought that they might be more usefully employed than in saving her own legs, she set forth with a will, covering the ground at an amazing rate, and bending her steps towards the southwestern district. The only thing beside the muff that she carried was a small Russia-

leather case, which she had tucked carefully into her pocket; and she smiled once or twice when she thought of it, as if she were amused.

The purpose of her expedition was twofold. She had remembered that poor little Nan Cronin, who had fallen in love with her sweet face and her kind words, had asked whether she might have a photograph of the lady who had been so good to her. "But how can I send it," Joan had asked, "when you will not even give me your address?" "I'll come for it myself," Nan had declared. "You've asked me to come, haven't you, miss? And you'll give me the photo to take away with me?"

Joan had promised to do so; but contrary to her expectations, Nan had never appeared. In the stress of somewhat trying circumstances, Joan had forgotten the promise, and ceased to expect a call; but now, for some reason or other, the details of her conversation with the girl came back to her mind, and led to an unexpected result.

Joan had learnt Mr. Cronin's address, and she resolved to go to the shop and see Nan for herself. The photograph sufficed as a reason for her visit; and—here came in the second purpose of her mind—she might see Nan alone, and possi-

bly gain some information that might be of value to the Rockinghams. She had not much hope; but, at least, she could satisfy her curiosity a little, and learn why Nan had never been to see her since the day of the accident to the Scotch express.

She had no difficulty in finding the way to Cronin's place of business. But as soon as she saw it, her heart died within her. The shutters were up, the doorstep was dirty, the upper windows seemed to be veiled with cobwebs and dust. There was an air of desolation about the house which startled her. Had the man Cronin gone away with his relations, his goods and chattels? Perhaps he had left England, and taken the diamonds with him, if they were not already disposed of; in which case, it was as unlikely that Lady Rockingham would ever see her jewels again as that Joan's character for honesty and uprightness would be cleared. She stopped short, and regarded the closed shutters with an aching heart as this reflection occurred to her.

A frowsy woman in a black bonnet now appeared at the door of the next house, and addressed herself to the visitor.

"If it's Mr. Cronin you want," she said, with a touch of the brogue which Joan liked, "sure it's himself as went away yesterday morning, and the holy saints know when he'll be back!"

"Is the house shut up then?"

"Sure, an' don't you see that it's shut up? You wouldn't have it left open to all the winds that blow?"

"But the girl, the niece?" said Joan earnestly. "Nan Cronin. You know her, don't you? Has she gone, too?"

The woman shook her rough head.

"I couldn't tell you, miss; and that's the holy truth! She's maybe gone, and maybe not; but I've not seen a trace of her for the last two days or more; but if your ladyship would knock at the door, you might find that she was left at home to take care of the house."

Joan acted on the suggestion. She knocked, she rang, and then she knocked again. At first no answer came; but after a time she thought she heard a shuffling step inside the house, and presently there came the sound of a voice through the slot of the letter-box:

"Who's there?"

"Is that you, Nan?" said Joan.

"Yes, it's Nan. Who is it?"

Joan put her mouth close to the letter-box, and spoke very clearly:

"Don't you remember the railway accident, Nan? You have never been to see me, so I have come to see you."

There was a silence. Joan spoke again. Don't you remember me? Won't you open the door and let me in?"

Nan—for it was her voice that had spoken—didn't reply; but there was the sound of bolts being drawn, and a key turned in the lock. Then the door opened a little way, and the girl's white face appeared in the aperture.

"Is it really you, miss?" she said distrustfully.

"Of course it is!" said Joan, in her cheeriest voice. "Suppose you let me come in, and then we can have a little talk."

"Yes, I'll let you in," said Nan, opening the door wider. "Uncle will half kill me if he knows; but I don't care. Come in, miss, I've wanted bad to see you; but uncle's been keeping me in a good bit lately, and I've never been able to get so far."

Joan thought that the girl looked whiter and more shrunken than ever. There were dark shadows round her eyes, and her face was very thin. With sudden sympathy Joan held out both her hands to the shabby little working girl, and drew her to her side.

"My dear, you look ill and miserable! What is the matter?"

Nan turned away her face, which had begun to twitch in a curious and almost alarming manner. She left her hands passively in Joan's, but she looked like a culprit who would have liked to sink through the floor.

"Let us come into one of the rooms and then you can tell me all about it," said Joan. "Are you all alone in the house? You must get very lonely, poor child!"

Nan snatched her hands away, and set her face towards the passage. "You can come down here if you like," she said, in a smothered voice. "I was sitting in the kitchen. It's all in a mess, but it doesn't seem worth while to clear up. I suppose I shall only be here for a day or two."

"How's that?" said Joan.

They had reached the kitchen by this time—

a dusty, dreary place, where a very small fire smoldered in a smutty grate, and a litter of dirty plates and cups filled the dresser and the table. The room did not look as if anybody had "cleaned up" for a month or two.

Nan pushed forward a wooden chair for her visitor, then seated herself on a stool and looked stolidly at the floor.

"Aren't you at all pleased to see me, Nan?" said Joan.

Nan's lips trembled, but she gave only an impatient jerk by way of reply.

"I thought you would perhaps be glad. You remember you promised to come and see me. I kept a photograph of myself for you. Would you like to have it?"

"Yes," said Nan, huskily; then, with a little effort, "if it's a good one."

"Look at it," said Joan, drawing out the leather case, "and tell me whether you would care to keep it or not."

It was a pretty photograph. It represented Joan in evening-dress, with her head turned a little over her shoulder in the fashion of modern photographs. The graceful figure showed to

advantage in this fashion, and it was plain that Nan was pleased.

"It's a lovely dress!" she said at length. "Do you often wear a dress like that?"

"Not very often. When there is anything special," said Joan, as she might have answered a child.

"You've got a long train, and a necklace, and a beautiful comb in your hair!" said Nan, musingly. "Yes, it's an awful nice photo! I'd like to keep it very much."

"You may have it!" said Joan. "And now I will show you another, though you must not keep it, because I have only this one. Do you know it?"

The photograph represented Geoffrey Brandon. It was a striking likeness—perhaps a little flattered, but decidedly good.

"Yes, I know it," said Nan dully. "It's the chap that was with you in the accident."

Joan laughed and assented.

"Your young man?" said Nan.

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"And—he ain't dead yet?"

"*Dead!*" said Joan, with shocked emphasis.

"Most certainly not. What makes you ask that question?"

To her surprise, Nan burst into a sudden storm of tears. In vain Joan tried to soothe her. She sobbed aloud; she rocked herself backwards and forwards; she shook from head to foot with the violence of her grief. Joan ceased to argue or to coax; she simply put her arm round the heaving shoulders, and drew the untidy head close to her breast. And by and by Nan grew calm enough to speak.

"I didn't mean to do him no harm," she said, "but it was all my fault. And I couldn't tell for certain whether he was alive or dead."

"Do you mean Mr. Brandon?"

"Him in the picture—yes."

"It could not be your fault that he met with that accident." For even now Joan did not know all the truth.

"Haccident! It weren't no haccident!" said Nan dolorously. "It was Josiah pushed him down the stairs—Josiah, my cousin. He calls himself Julius Townley because he thinks it sounds better, and he married a real lady. It was his address as Mr. Brandon wanted off of me, the

night he met me by the church; and I give it him, and he went there at once."

"But you were not to blame. You could not tell that any harm would happen to him."

"It was me as done it," said Nan doggedly. "Uncle Nat brought me up, and I thought I ought to do what he told me—I'd always done it before—and I felt bad when I knew I'd given Josiah's address to the gentleman. So when I came back I told uncle what I'd done. Well, he ups and knocks me down first thing. And then he goes off in a great hurry, and gets to Josiah's rooms before your gentleman, and tells Josiah what to expect. So they were prepared, don't you see?"

"And that was how Geoffrey was hurt?" said Joan. It was a revelation to her.

CHAPTER XV.

NAN'S MYSTERY.

NAN looked at her pitifully, and rubbed her eyes.

"I'd never have said a word if I'd thought harm would come of it," she said. "I knew he'd beat me; he always beats me if things go wrong: but I thought that would be the worst of it."

"How did you get to know that he was hurt?"

"I didn't know for a day or two. Then Josiah came and talked it over with uncle. They was both a bit frightened when they knew he was so bad. I thought he was dead, and that's why I didn't dare come and see you. I knew there was something wrong because they whispered together and looked scared, and once the lady came—Josiah's wife, you know——"

"Nina?" murmured Joan, more to herself than to Nan. But the girl caught at the word.

"That's the name! Josiah calls her that when

he's angry. He says it ought to be 'ninny.' He says she is clever enough sometimes, but she can be a reg'lar fool."

"You know a great deal, Nan," said Joan rather sadly. "Poor child! you have had no one to love you, no one to care for you! Wouldn't you like to come away from your uncle, and be taught nice things, and live in my home, and be my little friend?"

"Yours?" said Nan, opening her great dark eyes as wide as they would go. "Yours? But —I near killed your fellow."

"Never mind that. You didn't mean to do it."

"I thought you'd never forgive me. If he'd died——"

She choked over the word, and Joan felt the tears rise to her own eyes.

"My dear, you were doing only what you thought right. You were trying to be faithful and true to the people who brought you up. But now that you see they are often mistaken, often wrong, often cruel, won't you come away from them and live in a different world—a world where you will be taught to love what is right, where

you will not be in straits between your duty to God and your duty to your neighbor?"

She had forgotten that Nan would not exactly understand this kind of address, but the spirit of it was clear enough, even if the girl was puzzled by the words. She looked up into Joan's face with an air of fascinated attention.

"Do you mean you'd take me into your house and hide me away from uncle and Josiah and his wife, and pay for my keep and my clothes, all for nothing? What 'ud you want me to do for it?"

"Nothing," said Joan quickly, "except be a good girl."

"Maybe you want me to tell you all about Uncle Nat's doings. Then you'd get him into prison, and he would say it was all my fault. I shouldn't like that; I'd rather starve."

"I will never ask you to tell me anything that you would rather keep to yourself," said Joan, with sudden decision. "I am not offering you a bribe. I want you to grow up a good woman, away from your present friends, who will make you miserable—and wicked, too, perhaps, in course of time; and I want it for your own sake, Nan, and not for mine."

"I thought" said Nan, in a whisper, "that you, maybe, wanted to see how much you could get out of me."

Joan's conscience pricked her. Perhaps that had been, to some extent, the reason of her coming. But she saw things differently now, and was ashamed of the desire she had had to act the part of a detective, to extract by kindliness or by ingenuity the facts that poor little Nan thought it her bounden duty to conceal. She put her hand caressingly against Nan's cheek as she replied:

"Perhaps I thought so once, but I don't think so now. You need never tell me anything. I will not ask."

Nan drew a long breath—it seemed like a sigh of relief—and sat very still. Presently Joan asked her when she had eaten last, and was startled to hear that she had nothing but dry bread and tea in the house."

"Why don't you go out and get something else?" she asked.

"I dussent," said Nan curtly. "Uncle might be back any moment, and he told me not to go outside the door."

"But he may not come back for some time, and you are starving."

"The baker's boy brings some bread every other day," said Nan. "You can't starve on that, miss. Besides, it's no use for me to go out; I've got no money."

"Then I'll tell you what I will do, Nan. I'll go out for you, and bring you in two or three little things. While I am out you can perhaps get the fire to burn up, and—and"—Joan spoke with hesitation, for fear of hurting Nan's feelings—"you might, perhaps, wash a few plates and make the place a little tidier, might you not? and then I'll cook the dinner!"

"You, miss? But you can't cook, can you?"

"Indeed, I can, Nan. Now you must get things ready, and I will go out and see what I can find. Would you like a beefsteak and potatoes?"

Nan's pale cheek flushed.

"I thought I was hungry," she said, putting her hand up to her throat," but I don't feel as though I cared for anything just now——"

"Faint with hunger, that's what it is," thought Joan compassionately. "Never mind

about clearing up, Nan; sit down and rest until I come back again; and you can lend me a basket, if you have one, for I shall have several things to carry."

Nan looked amazed, but found a basket which was not quite too dirty for Joan to carry; and that young lady departed forthwith on a shopping errand which interested her far more than expeditions in search of gloves or ribbons in Bond Street or Piccadilly.

Her basket was heavy when she came back again, and she laughed gaily at Nan's transfigured face as Joan's purchases were unpacked on the kitchen-table. There was meat to be cooked, and there was a tinned-tongue for immediate consumption; there were eggs and butter and jam; there were some oranges and chocolate sweets, for Joan was mindful of what were likely to be Nan's tastes; and, last of all, there was a ready-made Christmas pudding and a cake. It was wonderful to see how far Joan's comparatively few shillings had been made to go.

So the fire was made up, and some of the food was cooked and eaten, and a color came to Nan's pale cheeks and a contented smile to her lips.

She was grateful, too, for, after staring at Joan in silence for a considerable time, she said:

"My, you *are* good to me!"—with a touch of almost passionate feeling in her tone.

"And now I must go," said Joan cheerfully. "I have only a shilling left, Nan, but you must take that; and see, here are some stamps. If there is anything I can do, you must write to me. You must not let yourself be left without proper food; but you have enough now to last you for a day or two."

"I should think I had!" said Nan. "Uncle don't give me jam and plum-pudding, I can tell you. It's real kind of you, miss, especially when I think about the gentleman——"

"Don't think of him," said Joan, seeing the tears in the girl's eyes, and dreading another breakdown; "he is getting better now, and he will soon be quite strong again."

"And when's the wedding, miss?"

"The wedding?" Joan's face grew gray, although she was not vexed with the question. "I don't know. Never, perhaps."

"But I thought you were fond of him, miss, and him of you?"

"Oh, yes," said Joan, smiling a little as she put on her gloves, "we are very fond of each other; but sometimes there are hindrances and difficulties, you know."

"Is it anything to do with the diamonds?" said Nan suddenly, with a sort of gasp.

Joan stopped buttoning her glove and looked at her.

"What do you know about the diamonds?" she said, almost involuntarily.

"Nothing—nothing!" cried Nan, in haste. "Only you might just tell me, miss, if it's anything to do with the diamonds, and—and a blue cloak?"

"Nan!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to say it! I ought not to tell other people's secrets, I know. But you've been so kind to me, miss. You might just tell me if it's anything of a quarrel about things like that, and then if it isn't I won't mind?"

"It is not a quarrel with Mr. Brandon," said Joan seriously, "because we understand each other thoroughly. But—I think I may tell you this—his uncle and aunt are not in favor of the

marriage, and until they consent I do not mean to marry him."

"And why don't they want it, I should like to know? Ain't you as good as they are?"

"They don't think me so—in a certain sense," said Joan, rather ruefully. "They think, Nan, that I'm not quite honest; that I have taken what did not belong to me."

"Money?"

"Money and jewels."

"And as long as they think that, they won't let you marry the gentleman as loves you?"

Joan was astonished at herself for having said so much, and tried to answer lightly; but her mouth trembled a little, and she turned away her face.

"Then it's a shame!" cried Nan, a passion of indignation shaking her slight frame; "a real, downright shame! It oughtn't to be allowed! That's what it oughtn't! And to think it's all the fault of that nasty, yellow-haired woman—and Josiah—and my own uncle—oh, it's too bad! it's *much* too bad!"

Joan had recovered her self-possession, and was looking at her gravely. "You don't know what

you are saying, do you, Nan?" she asked. "You must not accuse people in that wild way for things that are not their fault."

"But it is their fault!" said Nan fiercely. "And I won't let 'em do it, neither! Yet I can't get them into trouble, can I? I don't know what I'd better do."

She sat and rocked herself backwards and forwards in an agony of indecision. Joan stood by her and laid her hand upon the girl's arm.

"Don't trouble about it, Nan. We shall get along somehow."

"But you won't!" said Nan desperately. "You'll be miserable all your life! Oh, I'd like to tell you some of the things I know! And I will, too! Let me tell you something, miss, and then you shall tell me what I ought to do."

At the vision of this responsibility Joan shrank a little. "Don't tell me, dear; tell some one wiser than me. Won't you speak to Mr. Brandon?"

Nan shook her head. "No; it's you I'll speak to, and nobody else. Mr. Brandon would go, maybe, and tell the police. But you'll just listen and say nothing, won't you, miss?"

"I'll do my best, Nan." Inwardly Joan wondered whether she were worthy of this implicit trust. Would not the desire to justify herself under a false accusation, the pride that made her resent Lady Rockingham's contempt, and long to justify herself in the eyes of the world—would not all this tempt her to forget that poor Nan had also her rights, her sense of honor, her queer abnormal faithfulness to the father and son who had supported her since her babyhood? She had wanted to persuade her to tell her all the truth, and now she wished—so strangely are we made—that Nan would do nothing of the kind. But it was too late! Nan had already begun her story.

"It all came of Josiah," she said, with startled eyes. "A long while ago, he married a lady—her you call Nina—and everything went smooth and happy. Uncle Nat gave them a lot of money, and they had a good time. We didn't see much of them then. But Josiah—Julius he called himself, which he said sounded so much better than Josiah—he got into trouble. He betted and gambled an awful lot, and then he forged somebody's name, and got put into prison for it. Seven years his sentence was. Uncle was dreadfully up-

set about it, and Nina fainted right off when she heard the news, though she'd been saying only the night before that she wished she could never see him again as long as she lived. But I believe she was only thinking of herself then, and of the way people would point at her if they knew the truth about her husband."

Joan thought it very likely.

"Well, Josiah went to prison; and Uncle Nat, he was sorry for Mrs. Josiah, which she called herself Mrs. Townley, you know; and he gave her a lot of money every year, and pretty much whatever else she wanted. And Mrs. Josiah, being a real lady, went about among her grand relations, and told them that her husband was dead, and they was all very kind to her.

"But she wasn't a bit prepared for it, like, when Josiah was let out of prison on his ticket-of-leave; for she thought his time wasn't up, and she was taken aback. And Uncle Nat, being very angry with Josiah, wouldn't give him no money, so he used to go to his wife and borrow some from her. And when she made a fuss he said he would come to the grand houses where she was staying and tell everybody that he'd been a prisoner for

forgery, and see how she'd like that. And Mrs. Josiah would have given the hair off her head to prevent that."

"She did not love him, then!"

"She's fond of him in a way, miss. When they're by themselves she can be sweet enough, but she likes to live among the fine, fashionable people; and she couldn't do that if they knew that he was just out of prison, and only old Cronin's son, and not Mr. Julius Townley at all. So she took a lot of pains to give him as much money as he wanted; but by and by it was all gone, and yet he wouldn't be satisfied. And she was frightened of what he would do next."

Joan's mind dwelt with pity on the roughly-outlined picture of Nina's agony of fear. She felt sure that the woman must have suffered greatly before she allowed herself to commit a robbery for her husband's sake.

"There was something on hand as I didn't know of until later on," said Nan musingly; "but by putting two and two together I think I know all about it now. He wanted money for cards and horses, and she had spent all she could lay hands on; and I think he told her she must get it—

somehow, he didn't care how. This Josiah was going to stay in Scotland, at that place with the funny name—St. Romuald's, ain't it, miss? She went there, and a few days afterwards Josiah followed her to the same town, and he took me with him—at least, he made me go by the same train, though he pretended to have no connection with me when he saw me."

"But why did he take *you?*"

"Because nobody would suspect me, miss, and everybody would suspect him. If he was took on suspicion, and had diamonds on him that he couldn't account for, why, he was done for, don't you see? I was to stay there, ready to be made use of when necessary. I pretended as I was looking out for a situation. Then one night he told me I must be ready to go back to London in a few hours, and I watched him while he went to that old ruin near the town; and there Mrs. Josiah met him, wrapped in a big blue cloak with fur on it, and she gave him some money and a necklace of bright, shiny stones. They was diamonds, wasn't they, miss? And I suppose they belonged to somebody in your house?"

"To Lady Rockingham," said Joan. "At

least, we think so, for Lady Rockingham's diamond necklace disappeared that night."

"That was it, then, you may be quite sure," said Nan composedly. "They were lovely stones, and they had a big, queer clasp—a sort of bird in green stones of the bright, shiny kind. You'd know the clasp again now, wouldn't you, miss?"

"Indeed I should, Nan. But how came you to examine the necklace so closely?"

"Why, because it was me that brought it to London. I didn't know it wasn't her own then, but I had to be very careful, because they told me it was worth thousands of pounds, and that I should be half killed if I lost it."

"Do you mean to say," said Joan, "that you had the diamonds with you in that railway accident?"

"Yes, miss, of course I had. There was the gold and the notes in the black bag that Mr. Brandon saved for me; and the necklace, miss——"

"Yes, Nan, the necklace?"

"Well, the necklace, miss, was round my own throat!"

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY ROCKINGHAM INTERFERES.

It was late in the afternoon when Joan reached home. Nan's confidences had detained her, and she had been in no hurry to cut them short. As she considered the details of the girl's story, she reflected that she now held the clue to the mystery in her own hands, and that she could at any moment lay her finger on the woman who had robbed Lady Rockingham, and condemn her by the act, together with her husband and her husband's father, to penal servitude. She would clear her name, delight the heart of her lover, and smooth the way to her marriage.

And yet the question harassed her—had she any right to do it? Any right to betray the trust which Nan reposed in her?

Nina and her husband ought to be punished, of course. Joan had no false sentimentality on

was yours; but Joan felt it hard that she should be the instrument of their ruin. Besides, had she any right to speak? Nan was only a child; but Nan had trusted her, and Joan would never willingly betray a trust. And yet, could she darken her own life, and that of Geoffrey, for the sake of a promise given to a child?

The short winter day was drawing to a close; but the lamps had not been lighted, and Joan stood by the fire, with her head bent, and her hands clasped before her, deeply absorbed in thought. So deeply, indeed, that she did not hear the servant's announcement of a visitor, and looked up, in startled surprise, to see Lady Rockingham bearing down upon her, and Lady Rockingham's fussy, kindly, embarrassed voice in her ears.

"Well, Joan, I've come to have a little talk with you, and I hope you won't be very stiff with me," began Lady Rockingham, in haste.

She was very elaborately dressed in a long gray silk dress, trimmed with silver and chinchilla fur; her bonnet was also gray and silver, as if to match the nearly white curls of her coiffure. She held out a perfectly gloved hand as she spoke, and

nodded affably; but Joan did not respond with warmth. In fact it was only for Geoffrey's sake that she touched the gloved fingers at all, and rang the bell for tea.

"Don't trouble about tea; I want to talk," said Lady Rockingham, seating herself in a low chair, and looking up at Joan, who towered before her with unusual erectness. "I see you don't mean to be friendly, Joan; but really you must listen to me for a little while. I came only for your good."

"It is very kind of you," said Joan with some sarcasm in her voice.

"I meant it as kindness," returned Lady Rockingham delightedly. "You are always very quick, Joan, to understand the full force of one's words. Now, dear, don't be angry; but I've come to speak to you about those diamonds of mine."

"I know nothing of your diamonds, Lady Rockingham."

"But the clasp, dear—you know about the clasp? You had it in your possession."

Joan lifted her head sharply. Had Geoffrey told? She knew that her father had told him everything; but she had believed that Geoffrey

did not wish to confide in his uncle and aunt. It was inconsistent of him, to say the least, if he had already told Lady Rockingham.

But the next words spoken by Geoffrey's aunt proved that she had no need to reproach him.

"Nina was with me to-day," said Lady Rockingham, "in a state of the deepest distress."

"Indeed!" said Joan curiously.

"You may fancy my astonishment when she flung herself on the floor at my feet, and begged me to forgive her for an act of dishonesty."

"What?" cried Joan incredulously.

"It was in a good cause. It was in order to restore to me what was my own. But I felt that it could not end there; it was not enough for me to get back my Indian clasp—the one I value so highly—but I must speak to you about it, and if possible, hear your explanation."

"I do not understand," said Joan, turning rather cold. "Where did Mrs. Townley find the clasp?"

"On your table, my dear!" said Lady Rockingham, looking at the girl with a half-frightened air. "That was the extraordinary part of it. And when Nina saw it——"

"How did she see it?" asked the girl indignantly.

"Why, when she called on you. Didn't you know she called? It was some weeks ago, now, just before dear Geoffrey met with his accident. Nina called rather late in the afternoon, to ask you to go to a concert with her in the evening, and she was shown in here, as the servant evidently did not know that you had left the room. The first thing she saw was an ornament—a gold necklet, with my clasp attached to it. She snatched it up on the impulse of the moment, intending to get the clasp off and give it to me, then to return you the necklet——"

"How very kind of her!"

"But subsequent events upset her plans a little. Geoffrey's illness occupied me so much that I could not see her. And also she acknowledged that she had placed herself in a very awkward position. She did not like to bring the necklet back to you, and she heard that your father had gone to Scotland Yard about it. Altogether she was very much distressed."

"It was an awkward position, as you say. The dishonesty strikes me less than the impertinence."

"She was anxious to restore my lost property to me."

"I don't think any one but an expert could tell whether the clasp were genuine or not. And if not, she was clearly committing a theft."

"She put herself in this awkward position for my sake, and I must say I think it was very kind of her."

"Oh, very kind!" said Joan, feeling thoroughly exasperated. "And I have no doubt you recompensed her for her kindness."

"I don't know what you mean," said Lady Rockingham, flushing slightly; "and I don't like your tone. You are talking in a very unpleasant manner. Of course, there had been a reward offered for that clasp, and I consider that dear Nina earned it fairly. So did Sir James."

"Yes, I remember; it was a very handsome reward—two hundred pounds for that clasp alone, was it not? Mrs. Townley is a remarkably clever woman!"

"She is a very charming one; and, in the present case, she has been very useful. But I felt that I must come and ask you for an explana-

tion. How could the clasp have come into your possession ?"

"Geoffrey could tell you," said Joan. "He was here when my father brought it into the room. He had bought the necklet and clasp from a man named Cronin at Pimlico, and his one thought was to give me pleasure."

"Do you mean to tell me that your father bought that clasp ?"

"Yes, for fifteen shillings," said Joan. with subtle malice.

"Impossible ! No dealer, no shopkeeper, would let it go for that price. Why, it is a most valuable piece of jewelry. A ridiculous story ! Either your father must have been making fun of you, or you are drawing upon your own imagination ?"

"I have told you the truth," said Joan coldly.

"Nonsense !" cried Lady Rockingham. "It can't be the truth. Would not Geoffrey have recognized the clasp, and told me about it, if he had been here at the time ? I must say that your story is very improbable."

"I am sorry ; but the facts are as I have told them. Perhaps it would be as well if you were to question Geoffrey."

"I suppose," said Lady Rockingham stiffly, "that you think he is in league with you? That, I must say, I can hardly believe. Geoffrey is a man of honor. If he had found my clasp he would have lost no time in seeing that it was restored to me."

"I think he meant to take it," said Joan, "but forgot it when he was leaving, and left it on the table."

"Then he did recognize it?"

"Yes, he did."

"Very odd that he should have said nothing to me about it."

"His long illness may possibly account for that."

"I don't know. Perhaps it may. But that has nothing to do with the errand on which I came. Joan, your mother was a friend of mine. I am sure I always meant to be a friend to you."

Joan looked round the room, as if seeking for a mode of escape. If she could decently have run away and locked herself in her bedroom, safe from all attack and appeals on Lady Rockingham's part, she would certainly have done so. But there was no way of avoiding the ordeal, and

she passively resigned herself to suffer. She noted with a sense of humor that never deserted her even in the most trying moments of her life, that Lady Rockingham had made up her mind to be pathetic.

"You were always very kind to me," she said sedately.

"Then why should you meet my kindness with so much ingratitude?"

"May I ask how I have shown ingratitude?"

Lady Rockingham's dainty handkerchief lay ready on her chinchilla muff, and at that moment she thought it well to bring the morsel of lace and cambric into play. She applied it delicately to her eyes as she replied:

"Must I tell you? Why should you make me put it into words? Joan, you know what we all think?"

"No; I do not know! I will not even acknowledge to myself that you can degrade yourself by unworthy suspicions!" said Joan passionately. "You have known me from a child. You know perfectly well that I am not like Nina Townley—that I don't lie and steal, and traduce

other women and betray their friends ! She may do it, but not I ! "

Lady Rockingham took the handkerchief away from her eyes and looked critically at the girl.

" The cap seems to fit—if I may use so vulgar an expression," she murmured. " Who spoke of lying and stealing, may I ask ? You know very well what I mean, and there is no need for me to express myself more definitely. I came to beg of you, to entreat that you would make up your mind to tell me all. Now that we have got back the clasp, we don't care half so much about the diamonds ; and Sir James will not be hard upon you, Joan, if only you would tell me the truth ! "

" You do not believe me when I tell the truth."

" I am afraid you do not realize your danger," said Lady Rockingham, in regretful tones. " I myself would do nothing ; but Sir James is of a sterner nature, and the man Tanner is egging him on to a really vindictive feeling. Tanner is the detective we employed in Scotland."

Joan felt herself turning pale, but she faced her visitor quickly.

"He put the servants separately under examination," proceeded Lady Rockingham, "and elicited the fact that you had been out that very night, wrapped in a blue cloak. It is on evidence that a man who had been staying at the Castle Inn went out to the castle that night in order to meet a woman in a cloak. It looks very bad, Joan, because you would never go out like that without a bad motive."

"Is there anything else?" said Joan.

"Yes; but I hardly like to mention it. Mrs. Townley saw you in my room, with a candle in your hand, earlier in the evening. She thought it odd that you should be there, as you had my keys in your hand; but she concluded that I had asked you to find something for me."

"That piece of evidence is entirely false. I was never in your room that night, and I never touched your keys."

"Mrs. Townley saw you!"

"Mrs. Townley was absolutely mistaken."

"Oh, Joan, if only you would not be so obstinate!"

"So you believe Mrs. Townley more than you believe me, Lady Rockingham? I thought that

my mother's old friend would have had more faith in me!"

"Oh, dear!" sighed Geoffrey's aunt, feeling herself at once at a disadvantage when her feelings were appealed to. They were so easily swayed that she never felt easy when any one appealed to them. "Dear me! I don't know what to believe. Why should Nina say anything that was not true? She has no reason for injuring you. And then there was the clasp."

"Which my father bought."

"Oh, I know you say so; and no doubt he will bear you out. If only you had some proof of your story!"

"Surely," said Joan, rather timidly, "the man from whom my father bought the clasp would not refuse his testimony?"

Lady Rockingham shrugged her shoulders.

"Tanner went to him some little time ago. He declared that he had never seen the clasp, and never sold any such thing to Major Carrington."

Joan's blood ran cold. It seemed to her as though Cronin were conspiring with Nina to ruin her—to affix upon her the blame of the robbery, and, even if they did not convict her in court,

to make her friends doubtful of her. It was a cruel moment, and she hardly knew what to say.

But her sorrow and anxiety gave her a new dignity as she turned to Lady Rockingham after a pause.

"If that is the case," she said, "the man has lied, and some day his lie will be discovered. I am sorry that you prefer Mrs. Townley's word to mine; but, if you do, there is no more to be said."

"But you'll tell me all about it, won't you, dear?"

"I have nothing to tell."

"I promise I'll forgive you everything," said Lady Rockingham, "if only you will tell me——"

"Tell you that I am a thief? Lady Rockingham, is it likely?"

The sudden scorn in Joan's voice, the haughty pose of her head, the flash of her eyes, struck a new note in Lady Rockingham's breast. Hitherto she had been carried away by her belief in Nina Townley. It occurred to her now, almost for the first time, that Nina might be mistaken—that Nina might not even have spoken the truth. She looked at Joan's face, she listened to her voice, and she hesitated.

"There is no more to be said, then?" she ventured interrogatively, after that moment's pause.

"Nothing."

"Not even for Geoffrey's sake——"

Joan threw out her hand.

"I have given him up. He is engaged to me no longer. You must own that you are mistaken, and ask me to marry your nephew, before I shall think of doing so."

"I think Sir James might be brought to consent, if only you could see your way——"

"To forswear myself? Unfortunately that is not possible. Sir James must do his worst. Shall I ring for your carriage?"

She actually dismissed Lady Rockingham, who went away submissively, and only remembered to be angry when she related the conversation to Mrs. Townley.

"What insolence!" Nina said. "Why, she told you to go! And you, dear Lady Rockingham—you were so sweet and kind! I am afraid she is very callous. But you will have your reward."

And Lady Rockingham thought how nice it

was to have the companionship of a cooing, caressing woman like Nina Townley, and what a pity it was that poor Joan had disgraced herself so irretrievably.

CHAPTER XVII.

"HELP!"

LADY ROCKINGHAM'S visit was a trial which Joan supported with comparative fortitude until it was over, and then for a time it must be confessed that she gave way to her natural feelings of grief at the loss of a friend who had always been so kind to her. The prospect was very dark. Evidently Sir James and his wife were perfectly convinced that she had taken the diamonds; and, even if they refrained from prosecuting, they would never allow a marriage between her and their beloved nephew. And, indeed, Joan would not consent to marry Geoffrey until she knew that his friend approved of his choice. She did not wish him to be cast off by his family, and disinherited by Sir James, on her account. She would bear her burden for herself, and not cast it upon his shoulders.

Instinctively her mind traveled to the picture as it appeared to her. She would be obliged to separate herself from Geoffrey. It would be too hard upon him to keep up a friendship which could end in nothing more. Probably she would persuade her father to go abroad. She imagined herself loitering about the Continent, growing older and plainer every year, pursued everywhere by the echo of a doubtful story, by the suspicion that would always attach itself to her name. Her father's heart would be broken; he would die, and she would be left alone and desolate, until she found also a shelter in the grave.

Joan must indeed have been depressed when she allowed such gloomy fancies to have dominion over her: and she was still sitting by the fire, with her handkerchief—which was of quite respectable size, and not like Lady Rockingham's a mere film of muslin and lace—pressed to her eyes, when a man's step was heard on the stairs, and Major Carrington shortly afterwards entered the room.

"Is that you, Joan?" he asked, in a voice which sounded singularly spiritless.

"Yes, father." Her voice was muffled, and

told him that she was in tears. He came forward and patted her on the shoulder.

"Don't give way, my little girl. We've got ourselves into a pretty mess over this Indian clasp, haven't we?"

"I don't think it was our fault exactly," said Joan, with a laugh that was half a sob.

"Not exactly; but I suppose we were careless. I was an old fool not to examine the clasp more closely; but it never struck me that there was any value in the thing. And then, you see, Joan, you were very foolish to leave it in the drawing-room when Geoffrey had just told you of its value."

"I expected him to take it away with him," said Joan, drying her tears. "I left the room before he did, and meant him to take it with him. It seems that Mrs. Townley took it, and gave it back to Lady Rockingham."

"It is a tangled business," said the major solemnly; "but we are at least exonerated from the charge of wishing to keep it in our possession. May I ask why Mrs. Townley kept it for three months without telling any one where it was?

"I don't suppose we shall ever know," said Joan. In her own mind she said: "Probably be-

cause she meant to dispose of it for her own benefit, but found that it was too well known to be sold without difficulty. It would be rather a difficult thing to get rid of it in open market, I suppose."

"Lady Rockingham has been here," she informed her father. "She came to ask me what I had done with her diamonds, and to implore me to give them up. Oh, father, it is intolerable! Can't we do anything? Can I not justify myself in any possible way?"

"If seems almost impossible," said the major moodily. "So my lady has been to see you, has she? Well, Sir James has been talking to me at the club, and making remarks which I could willingly have called him out for in the days when men settled such matters—as they ought to be settled—with a pistol or a sword. I challenged the fellow point blank, I tell you. But you know Sir James—just like an old sheep. He got out of it directly."

"What did he want to see you about, father?" asked Joan quietly.

"Only to say what his wife said to you, I expect, my dear. If we would give up the jewels

—confound them!—he would not prosecute. He even tried to bribe me; but that was too much, and I soon made him ashamed of himself. But I'm really afraid, Joan, that there is some—some danger. The detective has the business in his hands, and I am afraid that Sir James means to let him go to all lengths."

"Will they arrest me, then?" said Joan quietly.

"My dear, my dear! It's shameful—it's outrageous! But that's what Sir James threatened in his oily way."

"I expected as much. Do you think Geoffrey knows?"

"They've got Geoffrey away for a day or two—Sir James acknowledged that. They said that he would make such a tremendous fuss that it was advisable to get him out of London if they proceeded to extremities. So he has been sent to Edinburgh on a bogus report of the finding of the thieves; and while he is away they talk of doing the thing quietly."

"I didn't think that the Rockinghams would have gone so far," said Joan.

"They've been egged on by Tanner, the de-

tective, there's no doubt of that—and Mrs. Townley, too. Mrs. Townley seems to have poisoned their minds. That woman must hate you, Joan. And yet she seemed such a nice, pleasant little soul when we came across her—not at all the person to do you a nasty turn."

"Yes; I don't know why she hates me," said Joan, in a dreary voice, which sounded to her own ears very far away. It was with an effort that she listened to her father's next words.

"Sir James gave me one hint of which I thought we might make use. I don't know whether he did it purposely. He said that no proceedings would be taken for twenty-four hours. 'You have twenty-four hours—a day and a night—Carrington,' he said to me, quite impressively. 'You had better make the best of them.' What did he mean?"

"Can't you see?" said Joan, with a bitter laugh. "He meant to give me a chance of escape, even if I would not give up the diamonds. It was really very kind of him! I might get away from England if I chose."

"Was that what he meant?" said the major nervously. "Now I should never have thought

of that. Well, Joan, hadn't you better—hadn't you better—wouldn't it be safer——"

"What? Fly?" said Joan, with a scornful accent on the word. "Run away? Never!"

"But if you can't prove your innocence—oh, I know you will, of course—but if there was any mischance——"

"Then your poor Joan would have to go into penal servitude," said the girl, coming up to him and resting her head against his shoulders. "You wouldn't love her any the less, would you, daddy? And I should come out of prison in course of time, you know."

"My dear, my darling, don't talk like that!" said the major. And his red face worked convulsively, and the tears started from his old blue eyes. Joan felt one on her forehead, and started up immediately, with her arms round his neck, to kiss them away.

"But if it is the fact, daddy, we must look it in the face. There is nothing to be gained by shirking it. Sir James gives me twenty-four hours, does he? I wonder——"

She stopped short suddenly. The thought of Nan had occurred to her. Would not Nan will-

ingly tell the whole story of the jewel robbery, if she knew that Joan were in peril?

For a moment or two she felt an almost overpowering impulse to fly to ask Nan for help; and then she as steadily resisted it. If Nan did not confess the truth of her own accord, Joan did not feel as though she could beg her to do it. The result, in Nan's eyes, would be terrible. Cronin, Josiah, and Nina would all have to suffer; and Nan herself, as an accomplice, might not escape. Nan would never betray her friends through any solicitation on Joan's part.

The major groaned aloud, and began to plead with her.

"Couldn't you go away, Joan," he said, "and find some place abroad where nobody would know you? There are such out-of-the-way corners in Brittany, you know, or Spain."

"They would track me," she said resolutely; "and it would be far worse for me if I had to run away, father, than if I had stayed to bear the brunt of the accusation. Besides, the very fact of publicity may bring more help than we know. Some one else may come forward, or other facts may be discovered. You will have to give evi-

dence, and surely you can put them on Cronin's track? Cronin must have had something to do with it, as the clasp was in his possession. Even Geoffrey said so."

She was betraying no confidence in making this remark, for she and Geoffrey had discussed the point before Nan had made her confession.

"Yes, yes," said Major Carrington hurriedly; "I can do that. I shall be able to give evidence on that point. But, oh, Joan, my darling, I shall never get over it! It will break my heart to see you in—in the dock." And the old warrior broke down altogether at the very thought.

"You must not grieve, father. Things may still brighten. I wish Geoffrey were not away. You do not know where he has gone, I suppose?"

"No, my dear. I have not the faintest idea."

"But they might know at his rooms. His servant or his landlady—— If we could find out, we might telegraph to him. I don't think that he ought to be away."

"I'll go round at once," said Major Carrington. "I'll send him a wire to-night if I can find his address. Yes; I'll go now. Is that the dressing-bell? Confound the dressing-bell! There

are things more important than dinner in the world. I'll go at once, Joan, and we will dine when I get back."

Joan smiled sorrowfully as her father kissed her and hurried forth. She did not think that he would be able to find Geoffrey's address. No; it was pretty certain that the Rockinghams had laid their plans securely, and that he would not learn what had occurred until it was too late.

She went up to her room and changed her dress for one that was trimmed with rich old lace, and the velvet folds of which were soft to the touch, and fell in long folds around her graceful limbs. She wondered whether it would be the last time that she would dress for dinner, would she be taken before a magistrate, and would he "let her out on bail"? What was bail? She was not sure that she knew. She ran over in her mind a list of the friends and neighbors on whose good offices she might rely; but, alas! they were very few.

Her father had not been the sort of man to make friends with solid, reputable, wealthy citizens; his companions were clubmen, like himself—old army men, retired Indians, or horsey men,

interested in bets and races. She knew plenty of girls; but whenever she had wanted help or countenance from a matron she had always turned instinctively to Lady Rockingham. Now that Lady Rockingham had given her up she scarcely knew what to do.

Major Carrington came back from his expedition with a long face. The landlady knew nothing; the man was away. When he came back she would ask him to send to his master the telegram which the major had carefully written out. The only danger was that the servant would take it straight to the Rockinghams, thinking that they would know better than he where Mr. Brandon could be found. And the Rockinghams would probably suppress it.

She refused to discuss the subject any longer with her father. She coaxed him to eat his dinner and enjoy his wine. After dinner she played to him, and tried to sing a little; but there she was not successful, for her voice was not in good condition. The major was very tender and affectionate with her. He did not even speak of going out, and sat beside her holding her hand for a little while, before he said good-night.

Joan found it hard to be cheerful. She nearly broke down several times at the pathetic look of trouble on the old man's face ; but she was a brave woman, and she kept her calmness to the very end. It was a relief to her when she had said good-night, and could go to her own room and sob out her heart on the bed, instead of sitting upright in a pretty frock in a brightly-lighted drawing-room, with a smile upon her face and a breaking heart that would not make a sign.

No ; she was resolved. She would not appeal to poor little Nan to tell the truth, and she would not run away. She would bear the strain and stress of battle as she best could ; but she would not give in unless she were compelled.

It was impossible for her to close her eyes that night. She lay awake thinking of all the chances of the future, the lost hope of the past. After the first outbreak of grief she did not cry very much ; she lay on her back with wide-open eyes, staring straight before her, and wondering what it would be like to lie in a prison-cell. And possibly Major Carrington acted very much in the same way, for when morning came he had the tired, red-eyed appearance of a man who is in

want of sleep. He was anxious to see how Joan had borne the night, and he had come down earlier than usual in order to assure himself on this point. But Joan was late for breakfast, and he waited for some time without obtaining any news of her.

"Will you send to Miss Carrington's room and ask whether she is ill?" he said at length.

This message produced an unexpected result in the appearance of Joan's maid with a letter on a tray.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't know that you had come down," she said. "Miss Carrington left word that she was obliged to go out early; but she left a note that I was to give you as soon as possible."

"Do you call this as soon as possible?" roared the major. "You should have sent it up to my room."

He tore the note open excitedly. Was it possible that Joan had thought better of her determination, and had resolved to escape while there was time?

"DEAREST DADDY," the letter began—"I have to go out on business connected with very im-

portant affairs, so don't be alarmed at my absence. I hope to be back before luncheon, but I cannot be sure. If Geoffrey comes, will you suggest to him that it would be a very good thing if some investigations could be made at Cronin's house? It strikes me that he might find it worth while to inquire.—Ever your own loving daughter,

"JOAN."

"There is more in that letter than meets the eye," soliloquized the major. "But hanged if I know what she means!"

He finished his breakfast in some tribulation of spirit, and sent once more for Joan's maid.

"Did—did Miss Carrington take any luggage or anything with her?" he asked rather sheepishly.

"A small bag, sir."

"Oh—a bag for the night?"

"I don't know, sir; she didn't tell me. But I don't think it was large enough for that. She sent me down for a little wine, sir, and some biscuits."

The major was more puzzled than ever. Joan could scarcely have thought of leaving the country with such scanty preparation. It was more

than likely that she had heard from Geoffrey, and had been asked to meet him at some appointed place. As a last resource he asked another question.

"Did Miss Carrington receive a letter this morning?"

"One, sir."

"Only one? Eh—ah—from Edinburgh, did you notice?"

"No, sir; from London. A little thin envelope, very dirty indeed, sir, with the stamp put on upside down, and the names all spelt wrong. I noticed it, sir, because I thought it so funny that people should not be able to spell Miss Carrington's name."

"Ah, a begging-letter, probably," said the master with a smile. But when the maid had retired he put down his newspaper, and mused with troubled face over the new mystery that seemed to be presenting itself. And he became more and more anxious as the hours passed on, and still Joan did not come.

He did not like to go out, lest there should be a message from her, and yet he grew restless and uncomfortable in the house. Lunch and

tea came and passed ; the dinner-hour brought only a slight alleviation of his discomfort. He sighed over his evening cup of coffee, and became almost desperate as the evening wore away. It was comforting to find that no messengers came from Sir James and his wife—no constables armed with warrants, no sharp-eyed detectives penetrated to his home ; but he was nervous and agitated, and began to wonder whether or no she had been entrapped by her enemies, and whether he ought not to go forth and search for her.

Geoffrey himself appeared before he had settled the question. The young man was breathless and agitated. He had had a frightful scene with his uncle and aunt, and had threatened to leave their house, and never speak to them again, if they did not withdraw their threats to prosecute Joan.

Major Carrington showed him the letter, and was amazed to see his face flush hotly and then turn white.

" Cronin's house ! " he gasped. " Don't you see, major, that this means that we are to follow her ? And it is now eleven o'clock at night ! We have lost fifteen hours ! It is to Cronin's house that she has gone ! "

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT CRONIN'S HOUSE.

WHEN Joan woke in the morning she usually rang for the maid, who brought her a cup of tea and some letters. On the day after Lady Rockingham's visit there was one letter only on her tray, and it was not of a peculiarly inviting appearance. It was the letter that Mary afterwards described to Major Carrington—an untidy, soiled little note, much blotted, and very badly addressed ; not at all like the letters that Joan usually received. But, for some reason or other, it recalled Nan to her mind. Was it possible that Nan had written to her—had appealed to her in any way ?

She tore open the envelope, and read the words written on a stained scrap of paper :

"DERE MISS,—This is to tel you that uncle

came back after you was gorn away, and, the womman nex door tellin that you had been to see me, he tuk a stikk an beat me till I am black and blew all over for lettin you in. Deere miss, I do not wish to trubble you, but I think it is not right of my uncle to trete me this way, so if you will do as you promised, I will give up my family, an live with you as you sed. Allso I will tell Mr. Brandon all about the dimons. Please come at once, as I'm afrade uncle will kill me, and I could get out by the back door if I new you would be near."

The letter was signed "Nan."

Joan did not hesitate in the least. It seemed to her that this was a cry for help which she ought not to disregard. Besides, if Nan chose to tell the truth to Geoffrey, would it not be best? She rose and dressed hurriedly, scribbled a note to her father, and took a little provision of wine and biscuits, in case Nan were faint or ill, with her in a bag, which also contained a handkerchief or two, and a bottle of smelling-salts. It did not occur to her that her father might think she had given the Rockinghams the slip; but she did not think that

it was possibly an advisable thing to throw out a hint about the place to which she had gone. Her father would not guess, but Geoffrey would be sure to read between the lines. For Nan might be ill—might be unable to move—and in that case Joan knew that she could not leave her hurriedly. But she quite intended to be back by the end of the day.

She was extravagant enough to take a cab to the end of the street in which Nan lived. Then she dismissed it, and walked to the house, wondering a little how she was to get inside. But, to her surprise, the shop was open, and a grimy boy was sweeping it out. She looked round, expecting to see Mr. Cronin himself; but he was not visible. The boy, who had a shock of red hair, leaned on his broom and laughed at her.

"It's you that came yesterday, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Joan.

"You that got Nan such a hidin'? She let you in when she'd been told not, and the guv'nor thrashed her proper. He don't like her having visitors when he's away."

"Who are you, and what business is it of yours?" said Joan.

The boy grinned.

"I lives next door," he said, "and I sweeps the shop out sometimes. You may go in if you like. He's out."

Joan recoiled.

"I should not like to go in if I were to bring fresh trouble upon Nan."

"Oh, you won't! You've got leave. You're her Sunday-school teacher, ain't you? That's what she said. The guv'nor says to me this morning: 'If the Sunday-school teacher comes to-day, she may go in. Let her see what her pupil gets for disobeying of me,' he said. My, didn't he make Nan holler!"

Joan was silent from disgust.

The boy ran to the back of the shop, opened a door for her, and invited her in.

"She's here," he said; "she's expectin' of you." Then, in a hissing whisper: "It was me as posted her letter to you last night. If you can get her away from the guv'nor, I think you'd better. He'll kill her one o' these days."

Joan looked round in astonishment, but he had already quitted her and resumed his broom near the open door. With a momentary self-reproach

for having misjudged him, she stepped forward, and found herself in a bare-looking sitting-room, only one degree less desolate than the kitchen into which it opened, where she and Nan had sat together on the previous day.

Nan was crouching on the floor, with her head resting on the seat of a chair. From the constrained attitude which she had involuntarily adopted, Joan guessed that she was in pain. Her face was very white, and her eyes were sunk into great hollows of darkness. She scarcely looked up when Joan bent down and spoke to her.

"My poor child, are you in much pain?" she said.

"I think he's broke something," said Nan in a husky voice. "I can't stand on one foot; it's where he hit me first. Look; it's all swollen."

"The brute!" said Joan indignantly.

"He's a right to hit me if he likes, I suppose," said Nan rather defiantly. "But he's hit 'arder than usual this time. It's my side, too. I've laid here all night. I can't get up the stairs."

"Can you show me your foot, dear?"

Nan feebly thrust out a bare, red member, from

which she had long since kicked the shoe and peeled the stocking. The ankle was very much bruised and swollen; it seemed to Joan as though a bone were broken. A few more questions elicited a history of further injuries; and it was with a very determined air that Joan at last went out into the shop and spoke to the red-headed boy, whom she found sitting on a stool and whistling.

"Can you tell me where the nearest doctor lives?" she said.

The boy stopped whistling, and stared at her. His jaw fell.

"She ain't so bad as that, is she?"

"She is in great pain, and I think one of her bones is broken," said Joan. "She must have a doctor. I don't know how to treat her."

"I thought you would nurse her, and quiet her to rights. She said you had promised to look after her."

"If you are a friend of hers," said Joan, smiling in spite of herself, "you must know that I can't do much for her while her leg is broken until she has had it set."

"Crikey! This is a nice lookout for the

guv'nor ! I'd go for the doctor, and welcome ; but it is as much as my place is worth. Who'd look after the shop if I wasn't here ? "

" Close the shop !" said Joan intrepidly. " Why should it be kept open if the master is away ? "

" But he might come back at any moment, don't you see ? and then it would be the worse for all of us, for you and Nan, as well as for me."

Joan was struck by this remark. It made her reconsider her plans.

" I will go for the doctor myself, if you will tell me where to go," she said.

" Oh, no, you don't ! " said the boy under his breath. " Here comes the guv'nor! "

And, to Joan's mingled indignation and dismay, she saw that the doorway was darkened by the wiry figure of the worthy master of the shop.

He bowed when he saw her, and stepped forward, with a curious sinister smile upon his unpleasant face.

" Miss Carrington, I think," he said. " And not the dear Sunday-school teacher that Nan was expecting with such fervency ! "

" It does not much matter what my name is ! "

said Joan hotly. "Every person of any feeling must protest against the cruel way in which you have treated your niece!"

"My niece disobeyed me, and must take the consequences!" said Cronin, in his iron voice. "I had ordered her to admit nobody in my absence; yet she let you in——"

"When she was half-starved and utterly miserable! There is such a thing as a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and I think it would be advisable to inform it of your proceedings."

"Inform it, by all means! You will find that you are not able to injure me, Miss Carrington. I have every right to punish my niece as I please, and I will have no interference of any kind!"

"If you do not send for a doctor at once I shall speak to the nearest policeman!" said Joan, who was at white heat, and quite unable to speak judiciously.

Cronin could not forbear a sneer.

"I did not know that you were so anxious for the protection of the police-force!" he said. "I fancied that it was rather the other way—that they sought you, and you were eluding them!

It was rather clever of you to come to my house, for they would certainly not think of looking for you here."

"I am eluding no one!" said Joan, with dignity; "and I am thinking of Nan only. Shall I go for a doctor, or will you go yourself?"

"I will look at the patient before I decide!" said Cronin dryly.

And stepping past her, he made his way into the little parlor, where Nan was still crouching down beside the chair.

"Now," he said, "what is the matter with the girl?"

Nan started violently, and began to shiver and cry; but, although she tried to escape his touch, he got hold of the injured foot, and passed his hand over it.

To Joan's surprise, he did so very gently and with evident skill. Even Nan, nervous as she was, made no complaint, and he seemed to be gifted with the true surgeon's delicacy of touch.

Joan learned afterwards that he had practised as a doctor at one time, before he took to money-lending and collecting curiosities.

"It isn't broken," he said at last, in a matter-of-fact voice; "it's only a bad sprain. I know enough of doctoring for that, Miss Carrington. She don't need a doctor, nor a hospital. I can bandage the foot myself. You needn't be frightened; I don't wish to lame the girl!"

But his words and his manner frightened Nan even while he wished to reassure her. She screamed out, and clung to the folds of Joan's dress.

"Don't leave me!" she said. "Take me away! You promised you would take me away!"

"Oh," said Cronin, suddenly stopping short in his examination of the ankle, and looking keenly at his visitor, "you promised to take her away, did you? May I ask what for?"

Joan crimsoned under the intolerable insult of his tone; but before she could frame a reply Nan broke out again:

"I'll do anything you like, miss! I'll tell Mr. Brandon or anybody; only take me away! He's a bad, wicked man, my uncle, and I want to be good like you!"

"This is quite a revelation!" said Cronin, putting the foot down on the floor. "I think I

won't bandage her leg just yet. She will reveal herself a little further if the pain is not relieved!"

"Don't you see that she is not herself?" said Joan anxiously. "She is all but delirious; she is not responsible for what she says!"

"She's hysterical, you mean. Girls and women don't always know what they are saying, but at the same time they let out secrets when they are in this state. She wants to be let alone for a little while, so that she may come to her senses."

"Either attend to her yourself or let me go for a doctor!" urged Joan.

"I'll attend to her myself in a little while. Have patience, young lady! It won't hurt her to wait—nor you either! Perhaps you can inform me what it is that she would like to tell Mr. Brandon?"

Joan shuddered at the evil expression of his face, but did not speak. Meanwnile Nan had fallen into a fit of sobbing and moaning, interspersed with words and phrases which Joan would have been glad to silence if she had known how.

"I don't want to be bad. I'm not a thief. It's Nina and Josiah. I'll tell you all about it. It wasn't my fault. Uncle Nat knows everything.

He can tell you where the diamonds are and so can I!"

"Be quiet, you brat!" said her uncle, with sudden fury. "Is this the way you rave when I am not by? I'll take care to make you safe until this business is over!"

But Nan muttered and moaned to herself as though she did not hear.

"Help me with her; I'll put her on the sofa!" said Cronin roughly.

And Joan assisted him, as he laid the half-unconscious girl on the old-fashioned, chintz-covered couch, which he pulled out from the wall.

Then, as if convinced that Nan really needed attention, he produced a bandage from a cupboard in the wall, manipulated the foot a little, putting it into proper position, in what Joan felt to be a thoroughly workmanlike manner, and then proceeded to bandage it.

When that was done, he brought her a restorative and settled a cushion behind her head—all in a curiously businesslike, unsympathetic manner, as if he did it for other reasons than the mere relief of pain.

Joan watched him and was puzzled by his

manner. He looked, while he attended to the girl's hurt, as if he were concocting—or, at least, perfecting—some complicated scheme.

After his surgical work was over, he went into the kitchen, which was situated behind the parlor, and there Joan heard him move some plates and dishes, and open and shut the door.

He came back to say :

"There is sufficient food for a couple of meals. You will not need to go out or send out for anything. Perhaps you would like to stay with Nan for a little while, Miss Carrington ?"

"For a little while, certainly," said Joan, rather surprised by this remark, "but I ought to be at home for luncheon, or my father will be anxious about me."

"Not at all !" said Cronin, with a twist of the face that was usually understood to mean a smile. "He will only imagine that you have taken the advice that I should have given you, had you been my daughter—that, as a matter of fact, you have made yourself scarce !"

"I don't understand you !" said Joan, drawing back.

"I am sure you do, though you don't like to

acknowledge it," said Cronin. "You are too intelligent a young lady not to see exactly what I mean. If you stay at home to-day, you know that you are liable to be arrested; if you are here, you are safe. Nobody will think of looking for you at Cronin's place, you know. Therefore I should advise you to stay."

"I do not wish to avoid the danger which you seem to think is so imminent!" said Joan, rather proudly. "I shall rejoin my father very shortly. In fact, as Nan seems more comfortable now, I think I had better go at once."

"Not so fast! Your father is quite an old friend of mine. I don't wish to see him in trouble. I am willing to afford you an asylum. Stay here with Nan for a few days, and get out of England by stealth. It is the best advice I can offer you."

"I prefer candor and openness to stealth and falsehood!"

"A very unpractical preference! You had better stay."

"Stay, and desert my father? Certainly not!"

"Look here, Miss Carrington, I'm in earnest! It would be better for you to stay. Don't tell me

that you can't see the sense of that. I could even send word to your father in time to prevent him from making a fool of himself!"

"It is time for me to go!" said Joan, moving towards the door.

But, to her great surprise, he set his back against it.

"No, you don't!" he said savagely. "You are here now, and here you will stay until I choose to let you out!"

"Mr. Cronin, you must be mad! What right have you to detain me?"

"The right of the strongest, my dear young lady! How do I know what you know, or what Nan is likely to say to you, or what she has said already? As it happens, an indiscreet word outside this house just now might lead to very serious consequences. Therefore I mean to prevent any such word being spoken. You'll stay here until the danger is over, and you can be let go safely!"

"Do you mean that you will keep me here against my will?"

"That's it!" said Cronin, with his ugly smile. "I mean to keep you here, against your will, until it suits me to let you go!"

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTIVITY.

At first Joan could hardly persuade herself that the man was serious. When he moved away from the door, she flung herself upon it, only to find that he had locked it securely and carried away the key.

He then locked the outer door of the kitchen, and cast a satisfied glance at the barred window, which looked into a deep area, beyond which stretched a paved yard. The sitting-room window, though not barred, looked out upon a side-passage, and, as Joan found out, had been nailed down for some time previously, while its panes were too small to allow of a grown woman's egress.

Cronin smiled as he noted the glances of her eye.

"I'm going to leave you," he said. "I shall send away the boy and shut up the shop. You

may scream if you like; nobody can hear you. The house is empty, and your neighbors are not near enough to notice any noise you can make. You have the rooms and plenty of food and fuel. You won't be badly off."

For her father's sake, Joan condescended to plead with him. She pointed out that Major Carrington was an old man, that he would be almost maddened by anxiety if she did not come home, and that she would even pledge herself to say nothing about what she had heard or might hear from Nan's lips.

"And how am I to know that you keep your word?" said Cronin. "No, no! I'm too old a bird to be caught by that kind of chaff. I have made up my mind that I'll take no risks. Perfect safety is what I'm trying for, and I'll have it at any cost!"

And Joan knew that it was useless to say more.

He went out, locking the door behind him. Other sounds she heard, which she hardly knew how to characterize; but she guessed that they came from descending shutters and closing doors.

To these noises a dead silence succeeded. The red-haired boy had evidently been sent home, and

it was probable that Cronin himself had left the house.

A fit of the rage which generally attacks a prisoner came over Joan for the first time in her life. She battered at the door with her fists, she shook the window-sashes, she tore at the iron bars across the kitchen-windows, but all to no avail.

And at last, depressed and humiliated, she came back to the parlor, to find Nan sitting erect and conscious again, and very anxious to know what was wrong.

In a few words Joan told her, thinking it useless to conceal the truth. Nan's eyes blazed with sudden fury, and she struck her thin, bruised hands wildly against the couch on which she lay.

"Oh, what a fool I was!" she cried. "Fancy me giving us all away in that manner! I'm sure I didn't know what I said! I must have been off my head, I was that awfully frightened!"

"Yes, I think you did not know what you were saying, Nan!"

"I'd have cut my tongue out first! To lock you in with me, miss! Oh, it is a shame!"

"There is no way out, is there, Nan?"

"Not any, if he's locked the doors. Oh, it's

too bad—too bad! Will your pa be in a dreadful way, miss?"

"My father? Well, I am afraid he will be very anxious."

"And the young gentleman, miss?"

"Oh, he is away. He may be back to-night, or he may not; but I'm afraid they can't do anything—unless, indeed, they were to guess!"

"Guess what?" asked Nan, as Joan seemed to be sinking into a reverie.

"Never mind; it was only something I wrote to my father. Well, Nan dear, if we can't get out we must try to make ourselves comfortable here; and I think I shall see whether I cannot find a teapot and a kettle, and we will have a cup of tea."

She was glad to get away from the child's strange eyes for a little while. Her heart was inconveniently full, and she could have cried like a baby if she had been alone. But she had Nan's spirits to consider, and she refrained herself.

"I'll tell you what I've been thinking," Nan said to her, when the drinking of a cup of tea had brought a very little color back to her pale face, and even Joan's courage was revived. "I

believe that Josiah and his wife mean to leave London in a day or two. I'm not sure about Uncle Nat. I've sometimes thought lately that he seemed to be winding things up, as if he was going, too. P'r'aps they're going together."

"And you think they want to keep us quiet until they are safely out of England?"

"Yes, I think that's it. They're afraid I shall say that Mrs. Josiah took the diamonds. Because they'd get caught if I did say it, wouldn't they?"

"They might be."

"That's it, then; we're to stay here till they've gone."

"In that case," said Joan, "who is to let us out?"

She was afraid she had propounded an unanswerable question; but Nan, looking at her calmly, replied with perfect confidence:

"Oh, Sandy!"

"Sandy?"

"The boy with the red hair. Didn't you see him in the shop as you came in? He knows I haven't gone out. Maybe he'll watch for me. He's a great friend of mine, although he's very rough and rude sometimes. And when, I don't

come out, he'll get into a fuss—you see if he don't. And maybe he'll pass the word to the police."

"But that may not be for two or three days, I suppose?"

"I s'pose so. We can't help it, can we? We've just got to wait."

Joan wished she could be as philosophical as the girl with the sprained ankle. However, she constrained herself to put a good face on the matter; she tried to treat it as an amusing thing; but at heart she was weary and dispirited.

It was not the least of her tribulations that every one would imagine that she was trying to escape the arm of justice, and would thereby hopelessly compromise her own case.

As the hours dragged on, Nan suggested a new kind of anxiety.

"You'd better be careful of the bread and tea and things, miss," she said, when Joan brought her another light meal. "You know, we may get out to-morrow, and we may not get out for a week!"

"But would not your uncle send us or bring us food?"

"Don't suppose he'd think of it. If we knew

for certain how long it would be, we could manage; but there ain't no saying!"

Joan looked at her in dismay. The girl saw the look, and smiled back at her bravely.

"Don't you fret, miss!" she said. "Somebody's sure to find us before long. It's only a way I've got of putting the worst side uppermost."

"Indeed, Nan, I think you put the brightest side uppermost as a rule," said Joan. "I wish I were as cheerful as you are. However, don't let us think of it. Shall I tell you a story? I know some very nice ones, if you care for stories."

She told one so effectively that Nan's fervent restlessness was quelled, and after a little time she fell into a placid slumber.

And Joan sat and waited, wondering what Geoffrey and her father were doing, and when the hours would go by.

The afternoon passed quickly, and the room grew slowly dark. Joan lighted the gas, and prepared an evening repast for Nan. She herself had a difficulty in eating; she was excited and nervous, and had lost her appetite. But she compelled herself to swallow some food, partly as an

example to Nan, and partly because she knew that she ought to keep up her own strength.

Then came the question of rest for the night. Nan had her sofa, and Joan covered her with her own warm coat and an old rug or two.

For herself she found an old rocking-chair which she dragged round to the fire. There was no difficulty in finding something to do, for there were plenty of domestic duties which had been long neglected ; and, under other circumstances, Joan might have found a kind of pleasure in the cleaning of pots and pans. But it was advisable to keep Nan quiet, so that after nine o'clock Joan turned down the gas, and announced that she was sleepy.

The red light of the fire glimmered on the musty wall ; there was no sound in the room except the spirit of the flame or the dropping of a coal. Nan's eyes were closed, and she seemed to be almost asleep.

Suddenly she started into a sitting posture, and her eyes looked large and wild.

"There they are !" she said.

"My dear child, who ?" said Joan, who had heard nothing.

"Josiah and—not uncle Nat—no! Listen! It's Josiah's wife! I heard the cab drive up to the door. There's boxes being set down in the hall. That's Josiah's step!"

And now Joan did hear something; but the sounds of which Nan spoke had been quite unheard by her.

There was a grating of the key in the lock, and then the door of the little parlor was thrown open. Joan rose to her feet, and turned on the light, noticing as she did so that the clock was striking eleven. She turned and faced Nina Townley and a sallow, dark-eyed, beak-nosed man.

There was a momentary pause, and then Nina broke into affected laughter. She was dressed for traveling in a very plain dark tweed, with a toque of the same material; but Joan had never seen her look so ethereal, so delicately pretty as she did just then.

"So you are trapped!" she said. "So you are like the starling—you can't get out. Isn't it clever of papa Cronin, Julius? To shut these two up together, and keep them here until we are out of danger—it is a capital idea!"

"I don't think Mr. Cronin's cleverness accounts for it altogether," said Joan quietly. "He did not bring me to this house, for one thing. I came of my own accord!"

"It does not much matter how you came, so long as you are safe here!" said Nina scornfully. "We've been dining with him at a restaurant; that's how we know all about it. And, as we had to stop here and pick up our luggage, he gave us full particulars."

"You are going away?"

"Leaving England, with my husband. Julius, let me introduce you. Oh, he has gone up-stairs. I'll sit down here until he comes back, and perhaps I can explain matters to you a little. You need not look at the door; you can't get further than the shop!"

Joan noticed that the grace and refinement of Nina's manners had utterly disappeared; her tone was that of a woman in a much lower grade of society than she had moved in for so many years. Was the real woman making its appearance, now that she thought herself free?

Mrs. Julian Cronin, as she called herself, drew a chair to the fire, and placed her feet on the fender.

Then she looked critically at Joan, and contemptuously at Nan.

"You are a nice couple!" she said. "You would both betray us to the police if you could, but we've taken care to prevent that. There will be a great hue and cry about you to-morrow, Joan. I have done my little best to get you into prison, and I think you will find I have succeeded. Your attempt to escape—or, rather, to hide yourself—by coming to your father's old acquaintances will be quite a telling detail!"

"I cannot think," said Joan, "why you hate me so much!"

Nina's white face changed. It had been merely malicious; it now became suddenly dangerous, so charged was every line with deadly hatred and spite.

"Hate you? Of course I hate you!" she said. "Haven't you everything that I ever wanted? You have friends, you are pretty, you are going to marry an honorable man! Think what my life has been and what it is going to be; then think of yours!"

"You are trying to ruin mine!" said Joan.

Nina burst into a wild laugh.

"Trying? I have succeeded! The Rockinghams will never be persuaded that you did not make away with their diamonds!"

"But I shall tell them," said Nan stoutly, "who did take them, and then they will know that Miss Joan was not to blame!"

"You little rat!" said Nina viciously. "I don't wonder that old Cronin knocked you down! I would have killed you if I had been here! I hope he will kill you yet—leave you here to starve, perhaps, you and your Joan, like two rats in a hole! You will be paid out then!"

She laughed at the look of terror on Nan's face; but the laughter died away at the sound of a heavy knock at the hall-door—sounds, indeed, not only of one knock, but the heavy blows repeated at intervals, accompanied by the sound of voices which could be but indistinctly understood.

"It's the p'lice!" said Nan, clasping her hands. "They're saying. 'Open in the Queen's name—open to the p'lice!' They're coming in! Oh, Miss Joan, save me——"

For Nina had turned upon her with a face of rage, and struck her heavily on the lips.

"Hold your tongue!" she said fiercely. And

would have struck again had not Joan's firm hand been suddenly laid upon her wrist.

But the two women started apart as Julius Cronin came flying down-stairs from an upper-room, with a face of ashy-whiteness, with distended eyes, and teeth that chattered in his head.

"They're upon us!" he cried. "They've tracked us! We're lost! I will shoot myself sooner than be taken again! Nina—Nina, what are we to do?"

The heavy blows resounded through the house. Nina listened, and grew pale; but she was calmer than her husband.

"I doubt whether the police would make so much noise!" she said. "It may be simply some one who wishes to make inquiries about Miss Carrington. Wait a moment, and I will go to the door."

She went to the shop-door and listened, then called out in a clear, loud tone:

"Who is there?"

"Open the door, or we shall break it in! Open at once!"

"What do you want?"

"We want Miss Carrington, who is here!"

"Nina turned her face to the inner door, with an evil smile.

"Do you hear?" she said to Joan. "It is you they want—not I!"

And she opened the door.

In came Geoffrey Brandon and Major Carrington first of all, and behind them Sandy, who had, indeed, induced them to knock at the door by telling them that "the lady was locked up inside" and then, big and burly, silent and stern-faced, the police. But they had come only to make inquiries, not to arrest Joan Carrington. They were more inclined to arrest Mr. Brandon and his friends.

"That's all right sir!" said one of them, after a few words of explanation. "There's no harm done, it seems, so we'll say good night!"

Nina's eyes smiled in triumph at her husband. How foolish his plan had been!

But she had reckoned without Nan. It was Nan's shrill, high voice that broke upon her ear.

"Police! Police!" she cried. "Don't let them go! They've got Lady Rockingham's diamonds, and they're just going to leave England! Mr. Brandon, for God's sake, don't let them go!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE ORDER OF RELEASE.

FOR a minute or two there was a disposition to treat Nan's words as those of a foolish child. Geoffrey, indeed, turned pale; but the constable shook his head.

"Can't arrest on a charge of that kind!" he muttered, and edged towards the door.

"Listen!" cried Nan's frenzied voice. "Listen, or you'll get into trouble! That's the thief that stole Lady Rockingham's diamonds! If you don't stop her, she'll get away with them to-night!"

"The girl is delirious!" said Nina.

"I believe," said Geoffrey, "that the girl is perfectly right!"

"What folly! Officer, you surely do not attach any importance to the ravings of a girl in a fever?"

"She is not in a fever," said Joan quietly; "and I also believe that she speaks the truth!"

The constables looked first at one person and then at another. It was certainly rather difficult to know what to do. Nan's scream was heard again from the sofa.

"Pull down her hair!" she said. "Take off her hat and pull down her hair; she carries them that way. You'll find the diamonds in her back-hair, if you look! I said—I said I'd tell!"

Now, indeed, Nina was seen visibly to blench, and to turn white with fear. Geoffrey looked her straight in the face.

"It is easy enough to disprove the accusation," he said. "If you will kindly remove your hat and unfasten your hair——"

"But I'm just ready for a voyage; I really can't," said Nina. "It is too ridiculous! And really we shall miss our boat, Julius!"

"I think, madam," said one of the policemen, "it would be more satisfactory if you would just convince us of what you say!"

"Julius!" cried Nina faintly.

But Julius was no longer to be seen. Perhaps it had suddenly dawned upon him that the game was lost.

One of the policemen took the pins deftly out

of Nina's hat. Then, as she still refused to assist him, he felt the soft mass of hair at the back of her head with a careful hand, and suddenly blushed with surprise.

"I feel something here!" he said. "Don't struggle, ma'am, if you please! That's the way the hair comes down, isn't it? There's something curiously hard inside——"

And out of the horse hair circlet over which Nina's fair curls were drawn his hand extracted something which gleamed with a thousand fires in the gas-light—a string of glittering beads, which Geoffrey recognized at once as the missing diamonds.

"I'm afraid we must detain you!" said the constable to Nina.

And she:

"Oh, certainly; but of course, I can account for them. They are my own diamonds, and I always find my hair a safe place for them when I am traveling."

"But, all the same, they came out of Lady Rockingham's dressing-case!" said Nan.

Nina turned angrily towards her, and would have spoken, but at that moment a new strange

sound came from the upper regions of the house.

Geoffrey and one of the policemen instantly made their way up-stairs, while Nina, who tried to follow, was held back by the remaining constable, and finally fainted away in his arms.

She knew only too well the meaning of that ominous sound. Julius, or Josiah Cronin, had always declared that he would never be taken alive. He had suffered so much during his previous incarceration that he avowed a preference for death rather than for another term in prison; and he always carried a loaded revolver with him for the purpose of defending his own liberty.

When his wife was arrested, when Nan's tongue was unloosed, his own fate was sealed; and a bullet through his brain seemed to him the easiest way of escape.

Nina had really loved him as far as she was able to love; and the manner of his death certainly preyed upon her mind, and caused her to succumb to acute melancholia.

Before the time for her trial, on the charge of stealing Lady Rockingham's diamonds, she was incapable of understanding any question ad-

dressed to her, or of speaking sensibly in reply; and in a very few months her health gave way completely.

She died in an asylum, without recognizing any of her old friends, who would have been glad to do anything to assist and console her. But perhaps it was better that she should die without knowing the long misery of the life that would henceforth lie before her.

Of Cronin nothing more was heard. He had managed to get away before the final catastrophe. It was said that he had acquired great wealth, and was living in South America, but the story sounded rather fabulous, and nobody attached much credit to it.

Nan sometimes wonders whether he will ever come back, and has terrible visions sometimes of his vengeance; but since she married Sandy, the red-haired boy, who was set up in business by Geoffrey, as some acknowledgment of his timely information that Joan was locked up in the silent looking house, she has lived a perfectly happy life, and avows that she would not change places with any one, even with Mrs. Geoffrey Brandon herself.

For it happened that shortly after Joan's return to her father's house, a gray-haired lady called one day, and asked to be admitted, without mentioning her name. It was rather a shock to Joan when she came into the room to find herself face to face with Lady Rockingham, who was evidently very nervous.

"You must be surprised to see me," she said, in an embarrassed tone.

"I am, rather," said Joan.

"It is my duty," remarked Lady Rockingham. "Sir James says so, Geoffrey says so, and indeed I feel it myself—indeed I do!"

"Your duty to come here?" asked Joan, only half comprehending.

"My duty to ask your pardon! Oh, Joan, can you ever forgive me? I behaved abominably to you; but indeed I was misled by that vile woman——"

Joan raised her hand a little.

"That poor woman," she said, almost tenderly—"that poor woman, whom God has punished——"

"Joan you are an angel! If you can forgive her, will you not forgive me, too?"

"I find it more difficult to forgive you, Lady Rockingham. You had known me all my life, and she had not. You had more reason to trust me than to trust her!"

"Oh, I know—I know!" said Lady Rockingham, bursting into very genuine tears; "and I can never forgive myself. But, whether you forgive me or not, I felt that I must come to you and tell you how much I regret the past, Joan, and how I should like, if possible, to see you happy in the future."

Then Joan colored, and looked down, for she began to understand why Lady Rockingham had come.

"It has always been our dearest wish to see Geoffrey married," pursued the lady. "He is Sir James's heir, and we want him to be thoroughly happy. He will never be happy with any one but you. Joan, won't you consent to marry him? It is I that ask it now. I would beg it on my knees if I thought that it would affect your decision favorably!"

"And Sir James?" said Joan, somewhat wistfully.

"My dear, he is so unhappy that I don't know

what to do with him. He feels himself so terribly to blame; so do I. And Geoffrey will not come to the house; he scarcely speaks to us. It is hard upon Sir James; and yet we can't resent it, for we know that Geoffrey is right. We used to be such a happy trio, and now we are positively miserable. Nobody can put things right but yourself."

"But can I?"

"If you will you certainly can. Geoffrey can't forgive us so long as you refuse to marry him."

"I do not wish him to be unfriendly with you, Lady Rockingham. It is not my doing."

"I know it is not. Still, he is miserable without you."

Joan was silent.

"Don't you care for him any longer? Do you not want him to be happy?"

"Yes, I care for him; but you know, Lady Rockingham, that I said I would not marry him——"

"Unless I asked you to do so. And I ask you now. Dear Joan, forgive us, and consent, for Geoffrey's sake, not for ours!"

Joan held out her hand, still with a little hesitation; but when the old lady took her into her arms and kissed her with many tears she felt that she had been a little hard in standing aloof so long.

She responded to Lady Rockingham's repentant fondness very quickly; and Sir James's faltering apologies went home to her heart still more. And Geoffrey had no difficulty in getting an answer to the question which he had been half afraid to ask.

"Do you love me, Joan?"

"A little."

"And will you marry me?"

"Some day, perhaps."

But then it was her turn to ask questions.

"Geoffrey, are you sure you trust me now?"

"With all my heart and soul!"

"Even if you saw me in the most awkward and suspicious circumstances——"

"I should trust you implicitly. Why will you insist on reminding me of a very short phase of feeling of which I am heartily ashamed?"

"Perhaps because I think it good for you to be ashamed!" said Joan demurely.

But there was a nervous purpose in her eyes.

"Geoffrey, I should never care for love unless perfect trust went with it. Will you remember that? My word is as sacred as a man's word to him. I have as high a sense of honor as yourself. Will you believe this of me, and not of me alone, but of other women?"

"Of you, darling—not of all women."

"Not of all, but of many of us. We can only be happy together if we have that perfect trust, Geoffrey; and life looks sad and dreary to my mind if we lack it."

"We shall not lack it, and life shall never look sad and dreary to you through my want of faith. Dearest, I have sometimes doubted—sometimes scoffed. I have had moments when I thought that love and faith were dead; but you have given me back all that is precious in this life—love, hope, and faith in God and man!"

So hand in hand they looked out towards the fair fruition of their lives, and knew that, whether weal or woe was in store for them, they had tasted the best and purest joys of earth, and could never lose the memory of that taste in years to come, for their lives were crowned with love.

Marjory Moore

By ADELINE SERGEANT

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This is a strongly written story, with a vein of tragedy running through its length. The reader almost immediately conceives a peculiar sympathy for the little country girl whom the benevolent old Squire, with a love for music, assists to a career of fame upon the stage as a fair violinist. Marjory's fortunes, like those of many others who court the applause of the fickle public, suffer a collapse, and the arm upon which she expected to lean fails her; but in the end she finds a heart of gold and the story ends happily. It is really a charming romance, and will please a large share of the reading public.

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By ADELINE SERGEANT

377 pages, size 7½x5, Cloth, ink and gold, $1.25.

Miss Sergeant's new novel has not "Adam Grigson's" right to consideration, though it is not without a certain interest for the reader who has just laid down the latter book. The heroine of "A Rise in the World" is a little household drudge, kind hearted, good and unselfish, but untaught and illiterate as any other London "slavey." We do not say that it would be impossible for this girl to reach a high place in English society within an absurdly short time, but it must be admitted that the transition as described by Miss Sergeant is not convincing. A man's a man for a' that, but training, or the lack of it, and the human being's evironment must count, so that it is not easy to accept as a probable personage the cockney servant who becomes a beautiful peeress and charming woman of the world with such startling rapidity.—*N. Y. Tribune.*

In "A Rise in the World" (Buckles) Adeline Sergeant outdoes Laura Jean Libbey in her efforts to bring her heroine from the lowliest walks of life to the height of the social world. She makes the poor girl, who is a nursery maid, awkward, stupid, stubborn, and untidy, only granting her the graces of a kind heart and a sensible name, Elizabeth. Of course, the hand of every man is against Elizabeth as she struggles to make herself worthy of the position to which marriage with a gentleman has raised her; but in time, by the tender guidance of the rash young man's unworldly mother, the girl becomes a marvel of feminine attractiveness. One by one her enemies are laid low and she forgives them all. The story is not quite so melodramatic as those of its kind usually are. The noteworthy thing about it is the ease with which the author removes immovable obstacles.—*Chicago Tribune*

Readers of this interesting picture of London society will perhaps be impressed by the unevenness of its literary merit. Some of the scenes are capitally done; others seem hurriedly sketched, but the author's style is always femininely incisive. Despite a few seeming improbabilities in plot, the story as a whole is one which has in it an inevitable attractiveness, as do all accounts of real rises and progresses in the world.—*The Outlook.*

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